



ONTOLOGICA

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ONTOLOGICA

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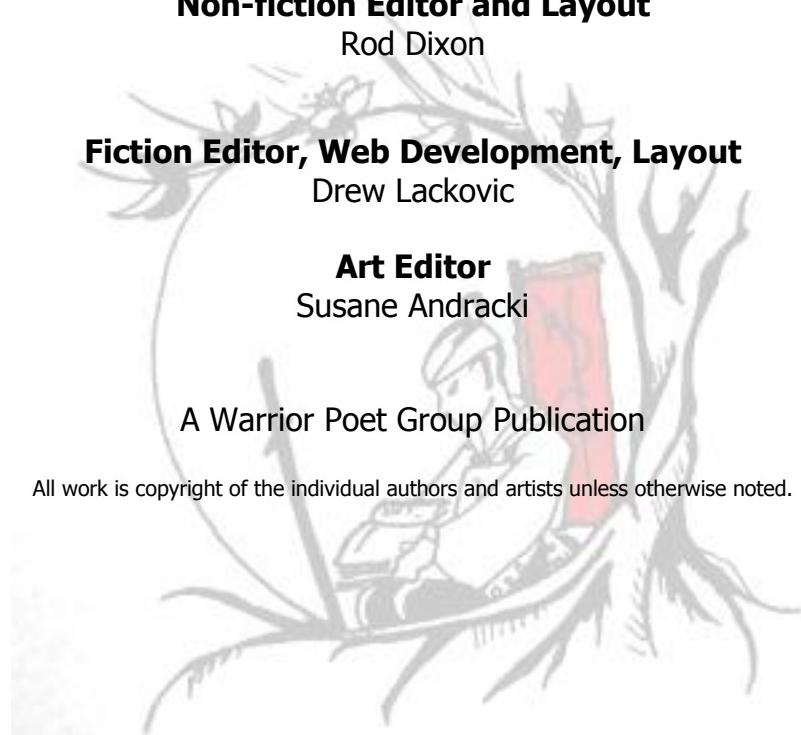
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Sarah Bell

Will-O-the-Wisp Candleholder



Jeff Fearnside

A Dacha in Kazakhstan

Shymkent, Kazakhstan

1 August 2004

Dear Tim,

In the past seven years of my professional life, I've averaged 50 hours of work a week. I sleep the normal 8 hours a night, and probably take another 3 per day for meals, including cooking and cleaning time. My former daily commute from Moscow to Pullman and back of 1 hour is typical in America. So is half an hour for shaving, bathing, and dressing. That leaves 32.5 hours in a week (counting the commute five times) and on average 4.6 hours in every day. Of course, the bulk of work for most people falls from Monday to Friday, so recalculating for that, we find we have a tighter 1.5 hours of free time per day during weekdays and a more liberal 12.5 hours per day during weekends. Not all of this "free" time is free, however; this is when most people do their laundry, clean the house, shop, and take care of other business. Still, we can safely say a typical person can enjoy a good number of activities during the weekend, though he or she doesn't have much time for anything during the week.

Why all these calculations? Because of the things most people do to fill their free time. Watching television, renting movies, listening to music, eating out, going boating, or driving in their cars are all typical pastimes. None of these are cheap. To pay for it all, we have to work 50 hours a week, often at jobs that bring us minimal enjoyment—50 hours a week to bankroll our 32.5 hours of "free" time. This assumes we make full use of all of these hours; some people just sleep more. Others sleep less and have more time for shopping—or work. All in all, I think the above figures accurately reflect the American lifestyle.

In contrast, what I've done for the past month since finishing Peace Corps is

work for 50 hours a week on the thing that gives me deep satisfaction—my writing. For now, it's bringing in no money, so I'm limited in what I can do in my free time. I've been using it to read, write to you and others, and visit Val's family.¹ Far from finding myself cheated by such low-tech, low-cost options, I feel my life has been enriched. In general this has been my experience in Kazakhstan. By no means am I living a life of poverty, but it is stripped-down compared to life in America. The result, as I've written elsewhere before, is that while I work just as much here, I somehow have time to do so much more of what's important to me. In other words, I'm not spending the bulk of my time to earn the money to bankroll my free time—I'm not a slave to a consumer system that says you must have more, *more, MORE!* in order to enjoy life.

I've visited Val's grandparents' dacha, or country house, four times now, and each time I appreciate this place more. It's not a country house in the current English sense of the word; it's more like what we would call a house in the country. Even more accurately, it's a shack. Small, dark, crooked, dirty, built with odd scraps of materials. It's also oddly charming. It has electricity but no gas; it's heated by a wood stove, and food is cooked inside on a tabletop propane stove or outside in a handmade clay oven. There's an outhouse and a small shower house with water heated by the sun. The water comes from a well sixty meters deep. There's no telephone. The backyard is a garden with tomatoes, corn, beans, eggplant, onions, garlic, dill and other spices, cucumbers, peppers, gigantic cabbages, strawberries, raspberries, a plum tree, an apple tree, two walnut trees (one unfortunately bitten by frost), and a pear tree. They eat fresh fruits and vegetables all summer long, and Val's granny pickles or preserves the rest for winter. Until recently, she never bought seeds or nursery plants; everything they planted came from the previous year's garden.

Is this exciting living? No. Does it take a lot of time? Yes. But there's a certain pleasure in digging one's hands into the soil, and you won't find fresher, healthier food anywhere. Sadly, it would be almost impossible to live such a life in America. For one, the dacha would never pass code, and you would have to pay stiff taxes for whatever

1 Val was then my Kazakhstani fiancée, now wife. This letter was written to my brother.

you built and the land it's on. Regardless, as sociologists now know (and Thoreau knew a hundred and sixty years ago), so-called "primitive" societies, despite the intensive nature of hunting, planting, and gathering, actually enjoy *more* free time than so-called "civilized" societies. It's all a matter of priorities. I enjoy having my computer. Sometimes I feel like ripping the telephone from the wall, though I generally recognize its utility. I haven't at all missed owning a television in seven years, and I surprisingly haven't much missed my car here, though I've occasionally longed just to drive up into the mountains. We must choose those things that are most important to us and decide if their cost—in money and the time it will take to acquire that money—is worth it. It's about being conscious and finding a balance.

Ultimately, it's a matter of what we focus on and whom we give our power to. I'm trying to become as fully conscious as I can, to separate myself from the negative influences of others. This may be an impossible task, for every thought I have has been influenced by something or someone, and my own judgment of what's "good" and "bad" may have been shaped in ways that, unknown to me, were negative. Still, I must try. All I know is that I don't trust anyone more than I trust myself. I'm part of this human society, and I'll always take the thoughts of others into consideration, but I'll weigh them against my own values of what's right and wrong, not those taught to me by the educational systems I grew up in, politicians, or large corporations, each of which has its own designs for me quite unrelated to my growth. I didn't come into this world merely to pass tests, sing mindlessly patriotic songs, and buy things I don't need. I came to live as a free man and not a slave.

Love,

Jeff

Sarah Bell

Anchored



Helen Ruggieri

Divine Winds

Olean, NY May 1969

My son is a toddler. We are in the back yard and the wind is blowing through the branches of the larch trees. "What's that?" he wants to know.

"The wind." I said.

"What is it? Where does it come from?"

I don't know how to answer. I remember some basic meteorology about hot and cold and direction and terrain: the movement of air in relationship to the surface of the earth, caused by the unequal temperature of the earth's surface. Something like that.

Sure, a three year old would understand the science of wind. I wasn't too sure I had it down myself. This was clearly the realm of myth—the explanation of phenomena, etiology. I gave him the myth of wind, which I was making up as I went along—the breath of god who wants to feel our skin as he passes, and wants us to know he fills the void around us. Not bad, I say to myself. I like it.

And I think at the time that we are as Coleridge said in "The Aeolian Harp," an instrument the wind plays on. But I was young then myself.

Kamakura, Japan July 2000

I stand in front of the tomb of the great Hojo regent shogun Tokimune in Kamakura in central Japan, the one-time capitol of the realm. A friend tells me about the great fleet of Kublai Khan which sailed from Korea to conquer Japan. On November 19 of 1274 the two armies engage one another at Hakata Bay. The Japanese warriors, Samurai, were specialists in hand to hand combat. The Mongols were interested in killing as many warriors as they could, using arrows, explosives. They did not fight

"correctly" with honor according to the way of the samurai, the bushido.

The Samurai were like the British redcoats kneeling in orderly rows while the American guerrillas stood behind cover, killing at will. The traditions of the Samurai threatened to destroy the Japanese. Sure, they were prepared to meet death bravely, but technology would have overcome them and their very way of life would have been responsible, their allegiance to their lord, their readiness to die, all useless against the arrows of the Khan's archers.

But the Samurai and Japan were saved by a divine wind. Tokimune ordered Buddhist and Shinto priests to pray for divine protection, which they did. A great typhoon arose and swept across the Bay, decimating the Khan's fleet and forcing the remaining ships to sail for home.

The Khan was not easily dissuaded from his course of action. He returned in 1281, seven years later, with a much larger force. Ships (some say over 4,000) set sail from China with possibly 150,000 men. The Samurai had not learned new tactics. There was no change in their strategy or their code of honor. They were ferocious, however, and would fight to the last man. They stood behind their divine shields.

The priests and the imperial family prayed to Amanuri, the goddess of the sun. At the Great Shrine of Isle imperial representatives begged for divine aid against the Mongols.

According to legend the sky darkened, the wind rose, huge waves beat against the fleet. The typhoon destroyed the ships again. Again, the emperor's army was snatched from the brink of defeat by a great wind. And Japan saw itself as under the special protection of the kami kaze.

The Samurai were officially abolished in the early 1870s under the Meiji Reformation or the arising of modern Japan, but like most long lived warrior castes, their ideals and myths lived on in the Japanese psyche.

World War II, Pacific Theater 1944 - 45

In 1944 Admiral Takijiro Onishi created a special attack group of suicide dive-

bombing pilots known as kamikazes who had one responsibility—to aim their planes at the central elevator on carriers or the base of the bridge on large warships and guide the plane to its destination. The training took little more than a week. There would be only one mission.

On the morning of March 10, 1944, Admiral Toyoda, leader of the Azuza Special Attack Unit, sent off the first group of kamikaze fliers to attack American carriers gathered in Ulithi harbor. "Let the soul of the Gods be with you this day," he said. "We do not have to witness your unselfish loyalty and devotion. . . . You will succeed with the aid of the divine spirit as you go to your eternal rest. Tenno heika. Banzai!"

Experienced pilots were too few to sacrifice. The young were recruited. Like ancestral Samurai, the boys (as young as 17) volunteered, prepared to fly to their death. Dressed in brown flight suits with long white scarves, they wore the hachimaki, the headband marked with the symbol of the rising sun. Most of the short training period was directed to take off and diving. Flight instructors would have become suspicious if the trainees had requested instruction in landing.

The planes were made of wood and cloth and loaded with just enough gas to reach the target and dive. Undoubtedly, they sent a lock of hair home to the family, the gesture of a warrior about to die. Perhaps they composed death haiku. The chosen toasted the gods with cups of sake.

By the end of the war close to 3000 missions had been flown. More than 2000 were against the U.S. Fleet at Okinawa between April and July 1945. And they did inspire terror and awe in the American troops.

The Samurai pilots sacrificed themselves to protect the homeland. It did little good, delayed the inevitable a few days, maybe. Admiral Onishi, the commander of the kamikaze warriors, committed ritual suicide (hari kari) on hearing the news of Japan's surrender, regretting that he still lived. (His death haiku – refreshing/after the gale/the moon shines).

Franklinville, NY 1944

On Saturday afternoons we go to the movies at the Park Square Theater in Franklinville, NY. It is always a double feature – two cowboy movies or a cowboy movie and a war movie. In the cowboy movie there are good guys and bad guys. Sometimes you can tell by the color of their outfits, but Hopalong Cassidy is a good guy and he wears black so it doesn't always work that way. One of the movies is usually really old—sepia toned and fuzzy. But the bad guys keep trying to make the good guy fight. There's a taunt, an insult, an act that can't be overlooked, can't be forgiven.

You know what happens. The face each other in the dusty western street lined by false fronted wooded buildings. Their hands hang at their sides. One of them goes for his gun. One of them dies. The code of the West.

Sometimes the war movies are in color. A brave American soldier dives from the battleship into the Pacific waters to save a Japanese pilot. The Japanese pilot stabs him. That'll teach you to be nice, I think to myself. I was maybe six. At this time in your life you are easily influenced. You have not been buffeted in the winds of education. You have no history. All you've known is war and the appropriate myths.

In Franklinville, NY, all the boys and men are gone to war. Women and old men are running the town. We are consumed with war, with loved ones who are in far places, with the darkness of air raids, the silence behind windows hung with small gold stars.

I lived on Second Avenue. Across the street was a house that needed paint. A man lived there alone because his son was away in the war—in Germany fighting Hitler. His wife had died. My mother said that was why there were no curtains in the windows.

We used to draw pictures on the sidewalk with chalk—caricatures of Hitler or Tojo, and they both looked pretty much alike. A circle face, a slash of hair and push-pull moustache. Barney, the man across the street, came out and chased me, shaking his fist and screaming something about Jews writing on his sidewalk.

You didn't have to tell me to run from rage. I got chased because someone thought I was a Jew and didn't want me on the sidewalk in front of his house. Adults

confused me. How to sort this out? Not wanting to cause trouble, I asked my mother why someone would chase you away if you were a Jew.

"You're not," she replied.

This did not answer the question, only provided her a way out. The myth of it, however, hovered in the air around us, in Sunday school, in the Christianity of the Romans, the historical necessity, the scapegoat. Some DNA protection (an archetype?) that insists the family, the tribe, unite against the other, now become an impediment, a problem. She did the same thing I did about the wind—considered all the options, the complexity of it all—opted for an easy answer. "You're not." Don't worry about it. Turn the other cheek, slap it. Don't dive into the water for foreign pilots. When you play cowboy, be the good guy.

Kamakura, Japan 2000

The war is over. I am standing by a tomb of a dead Japanese emperor holding a silk thread, organic, living, like a spider's, a historical thread pulled tightly.

If you pluck that string it vibrates forever. How did I get here? How had I jumped from that small girlchild on the streets of Franklinville, NY, from the front row of the theater on Park Square, to the other side of the world, sweating in the high humidity of another climate, another culture, a place where I never thought I'd be.

While I am thinking these early thoughts, gathering facts and logic around a moment of intuition, a suicide bomber is wrapping himself in a ritual belt, saying sad video farewells to family and friends (something like a death haiku), going off to kill a group of teenagers at a disco. He is doing it for country, to reach a place full of nothing, peopled with tales the living tell—virgins and manna, angels and clouds, Valhalla, for the moment, for nothing. Sweet and fitting it is that this divine wind blows and brings with it the smell of intestines, burnt plastic, blood, chemicals. Others are training – learning how to fly. They do not need to know how to take off or how to land. They only need to know how to steer.

It's snowing here today. Suicide bombers are drifting to targets across the

world. They are all carrying some god's great windy promise, ready to be vaporized. Banzai! For the emperor. For Allah, for Yahweh, for God, for King, for country, for Franklinville. For my son. For Coleridge. Because it's easier that way.

For those who will never live to be thirty, that sad generation of suicides more than two-thirds of them under 23. Those poor recruits to old myths. Like the Jesuits said, give me a boy until he is seven and we'll have him for life.

Is myth the root of war? Are we brave enough to stand up without any?

Blow if you will

fall wind - the flowers

have all faded

death poem (jisei) of Gansan called sometimes Ryogen (d. 1335)

Ann Welch

The Pits

Perfect Peachford, Ohio has no orphans, no outsiders, no strangers. Everyone belongs. You are smart. You are beautiful. You are talented. But, if you have none of these attributes, you behave better than anybody else. Otherwise, you live outside the village limits with all the other pits. I've been a pit. I will never go back to being a pit. And over my dead body will I ever see my Chickie be cast among the pits. I don't have to worry, really: Chickie is smart; Chickie is beautiful; and Chickie can play a jazz version of "Frosty the Snowman" that would make Louis Armstrong slap his knee.

Chickie and I live on Pineapple Street in the center of the Village of Perfect Peachford. On our street, house numbers are painted on the curb and cars coming from opposite directions barely have room to pass. Fireworks of children's voices pepper the air when the school a block away lets out for recess. Too-fat-to-be-hugged Oak trees line the street, giving crunchy, orange and red sidewalks in the fall and lacy, shadowed paths in the summer. Our house, with its wraparound porch and stone chimney, sits at center point of the cul-de-sac.

I return from seeing a client—I'm an artist of sorts—and enter our house to the sound of a ringing telephone. Little feet pound overhead. I know that sound: Chickie, my six-year-old, who should be in her first grade classroom this Thursday morning, is home.

"Chickie? It's Mom. Are you okay? What's going on? Why are you home?" In the next seconds, I process that the phone no longer rings, the extension in use light is on and I've gotten no response from Chickie. I pick up the receiver in time to hear: "My mom went tomorrow to Charlieboy, Mitchegun. Bye, Mitch Jacoby."

The name of Mrs. Jacoby makes me sick, instantly, not because she isn't a nice person but because she is the principal of Old Orchard Country Hills School and because Chickie is on the phone lying to her. Before I can tell Mrs. Jacoby that I, too, am now

on the line, Chickie says, "Monique, it's for me. Hang up."

Monique is my best friend and Chickie's god mother.

"Chickie, this is your mother. Please hang up the phone now. I'll speak with Mrs. Jacoby."

I hear the click of the receiver being put down and know to listen for a second, softer click of Chickie picking up the receiver again.

Mrs. Jacoby says, "Mrs. Charmaine? I'm relieved to know Chickie is at home. I gather you're not in Michigan?"

I don't think Mrs. Jacoby realizes Chickie is still on the line. "Just a minute, Mrs. Jacoby, I believe someone is at the door."

That is my code to let Chickie know I'm on to her. I hear the click, then feet pounding overhead and here comes Chickie flying down the stairs. She crashes into me in all her mach-two, hair-on-fire glory. She's waving her arms, mouthing, "No!"

"Mrs. Jacoby, may I call you right back? The UPS man needs my signature and I hate to keep you waiting."

But Mrs. Jacoby insists that she doesn't mind waiting. Being squeezed by a principal puts sweat in my armpits. I cover the receiver. Chickie stands in front of me with her chin jutting out like I'm the one in trouble. I don't like being caught in a pickle; it makes me hot from inside out like the flu.

"She's liar-ing Mom. I not say about her bee-gina!"

"It's va-vagina! Why are you home? Hurry up, tell me what's going on!"

Color flames into her face. Her pink cheeks turn a chapped red. I am a dope: demands and hurry-ups cause Chickie to harden. I trace my finger around Chickie's cheek. I won't get any answers from her until she has time to soften.

I speak into the receiver: "Mrs. Jacoby, I am afraid I'll have to call you back."

I hang up before Mrs. Jacoby can seize the situation, a talent in the DNA code of principals. I kneel to look into my daughter's fierce black eyes. A foggy awareness that there is something odd about Chickie minnows through my brain, but my thoughts are too much on the need to calm her to catch those silvery slips. I touch my lips to her forehead, and when I draw back, I rub the tip of my nose to hers. My lips to her ear, I

whisper, "Fresh cookies. Twenty minutes. The kitchen. We'll talk vaginas then. Fresh cookies." (Chickie being this red, I know to mention the cookies twice.)

When we come together in the kitchen, I want to begin our talk about body parts and how we respect our own and others, a talk we've had before. But I get sidetracked as I really see her face for the first time: tear tracks of white skin streak the bright orange blush on her cheeks. One eyelid holds the thick wobbly line of liquid eyeliner while the other, the one she always rubs with her fist when she cries, is bare. I bite my lip against my need to know about the forbidden makeup. That conversation will have to wait.

Chickie chews a cookie and stares at me. Her eyes show none of the emotions that have ruined her makeup. She's good when she's in trouble. She should be with all the practice she's had. Judging by her stillness, I know I won't get to the truth quickly or possibly ever. I take my cookie in tiny bites, enjoying every chew before trying to unravel another Chickie Charmaine mess. I know not to look straight at her as that only increases her fight. My cookie gone, I study my nails and send out my first question to lead into my talk about body parts.

"So, Chick, you know that Mrs. Jacoby's vagina is special to her?"

As she processes my question, her eyebrows, all four of them, knit together, sort of. She has two of them over each eye, one that matches her red hair and one in black pencil that veers up off her natural brow in another direction. She sits up like a new idea has hit her.

"She got a bee-gina like me."

Okay, good. I nod. Start off with something you can both agree on.

"Yes, that's right. And I have one too, a va-gina. Can you say *va-gina*?"

Chickie puts her cookie down, scoots to the edge of her seat and leans toward me.

"Hers wrinkly?

"With spots on it like her hands got?

"And her hole closes up if she don't put stuff in it?"

I try not to look at all of her eyebrows and count to ten as I squirrel my way

behind her questions to see if I can glimpse what is going on in her wild mind. I find the clue in the questions about wrinkles and holes. Last week, Chickie had come home from school wanting pierced ears. I'd said "no" because holes closed up when you forgot to put things in them and then your ears got wrinkly.

But the question about spots stumps me. I find myself staring at the dot on her chin I thought was dirt. When I notice the black of the dot matches the black of her third and fourth eyebrows, I know Chickie has made herself a dimpled chin, which, for some reason, she wants more than anything. I remember the last time she'd come home from Ellie's, loaded with creams, orange blushes, brown lipsticks and black eyebrow pencils. After I threw them away, Chickie hadn't spoken to me the rest of the night.

Chickie divides her friends into two buckets: those she acts the baby to and those she manipulates. Ellie McGregor is Chickie's makeup mule. Ellie steals cosmetics from her house and carries them to Chickie as pay-up after losing some physical contest Chickie sets up between them. I pick up another cookie and study it, thinking the body parts talk isn't working. I try another approach.

"So, Chick, if Ellie finds out you're wrong about the hole closing up, do you have to give all the make-up back, or just the eyebrow pencil?"

The phone rings saving Chickie but I need to make sure she gets the takeaway points here.

Before answering the phone, I say, "Don't ever put things in your vagina. It's not going to close up. And no, you cannot get your ears pierced, and yes, you have to give me the makeup."

I pick up the receiver. My heart beats in the pit of my stomach. I've never needed my eyes or ears to confirm the presence of authority: I sense the thickening in the air. I know the principal calls.

"Mrs. Charmaine, Verma Jacoby here. Please excuse me for not waiting for your call but neither I nor the matter at hand can wait any longer."

"This is amazing. I was reaching for the phone to call you when it rang."

I hurry on, not giving her the chance to ask if the check was in the mail, too, "We've

received four more items for the auction. I took the liberty of accepting them even though I know the deadline was last—”

“Mrs. Charmaine, Chickie left school unauthorized today. Rest assured, I will take the necessary safety measures to assure this does not happen again. Please tell Chickie for me that I care very much about her. She is important to all of us. And all of us make mistakes.

“Now to the point of why she ran away: Chickie was caught passing notes to Ellie McGregor about my genitals. There were drawings as well. Furthermore, the notes were passed to the other children during math class. I have freed Monday morning, nine o’clock on my calendar for us to meet. Ellie’s mother will be here as well.”

Mrs. Jacoby’s voice fills the right side of my brain, sending my juices flowing. There’s no way I’ll meet with her if Ellie McGregor’s Phi Beta Kappa mother, is there. On the left side of my brain, Taz, my own little cheerleader of life skills for doom, harps at me with the intensity of a cannibal drum core just before the big, white man meal. Can’t say “no.” Have to go. Chickie, Chickie, Chickie did it!

The harder I struggle against Taz, the more I fill with glue. I can’t think what to say. The words aren’t there, like they won’t be there when I meet with Mrs. Jacoby and Ellie’s lawyer mom. I stare at the wall, hear a chair scrape and feel Chickie take my hand. She traces little circles on my palm just like the little circles I trace on her back when she’s upset. She squeezes my hand and my breath returns.

“Mrs. Charmaine? I strongly encourage you to find a way to attend. Ellie’s mother has already agreed.”

I have enough breath to utter a ‘yes’ and hang up the phone with Taz’s cheer of Rah-rah-dope! Why’d you agree to go? (Half the time, Taz can’t even manage a simple rhyme. I am not going to let myself think of what skilled orator hangs out in the left brain lounge of Ellie’s mother. Abraham Lincoln, I bet.)

When I return to the table, my fear of principals and Abraham Lincoln trumps the body parts talk. Chickie hands me a cookie. While she dunks her cookie in her milk, she hums the da-da-da-a-a-a opening of Beethoven’s 5th in her effort to appear unconcerned. But I know my Chickie and I know she only hums classical music when

she's tense. I munch my cookie, working every bite over and over, deciding on which of our games to use to melt her down. Her fingers replace her humming, tapping the opening bars much too fast on the tabletop. I decide to use our own version of a knock, knock joke, the only version in which Chickie knows her lines.

"I love you way more than you do me, Chickie Charmaine."

Chickie's fingers slow their tapping. Her eyebrows shoot up. "How much way more?"

"So much way more, that you can't even see that way more far."

Chickie rolls her eyes. I know my line isn't that snappy but it's the best I can do with my head full of Principal Verma Jacoby's bee-gi-na, Ellie McGregor's mom, and Taz's flapping.

Chickie says, "I love you more than that."

"How much more?"

"More than snowflakes."

I stop eating my cookie. "What do you mean?"

Chickie gives me that smile of hers when she knows she's won. She points her pointer finger in the air: "I got more loves for you than snowflakes."

I lean back against my chair. "That's good, really good. Better than mine."

Winning to Chickie makes life good but today her fingers on her left hand still tap.

Chickie and her best friend Eddie like to pretend they are orphans. I don't know when or how Chickie learned about orphans but she did and I haven't decided when to tell her about me or if I ever will. I'm not sure it's her business. The tapping of her fingers is speeding up. I need to try that game.

"What kind of orphans?" I say.

Her fingers rest on the table top like fingers on piano keys. "Pirates!"

"What's the ship's name?"

Chickie claps both of her hands to her chest as she thinks of one. "Puppies!" she shouts.

Now wait a minute: this game is not going where I want it to go. "That's not a pirate ship name."

"The Har-Har Puppy ship."

She grabs another cookie and starts dunking, no humming, no tapping. I dunk my cookie along with hers. "Good name," I say, ignoring my urge to tell her once again that we are not getting a puppy.

The next part of Eddie and Chickie's Orphan game is that they tell each other why they're orphans. They make up reasons like a worm ate your mom; or, a big, fat crow got in the house and flew away with your mom. Of course after each exclamation, the one being orphaned gets to ask 'why' the worm did that or the crow did this until the explainer runs out of explaining. When as much is answered as a six year old can think up to answer (which can take a while), they giggle about how a worm's tummy is too small and a crow's feet too small to ever take away their mommies.

"Okay we've got the name. So now you want to know why you're an orphan?"

Chickie wriggles in her chair like she does when I put a present on the table for her. "Why?"

"Because if you don't tell me everything you know about Mrs. Jacoby's vagina, Ellie McGregor, and your notes, an ant is going stick out one of its teensy weensy legs and trip me. Then he's going grab me by my big toe and drag me off to Ganawanda Licorice Land."

Chickie wriggles again. Her eyebrows jut up. "Why?"

"Because I have to meet with Mrs. Jacoby on Monday morning and Ellie's mom is going to be there."

Chickie's eyes go all squinty: the game is over. "Dad came-ing too?"

Ellie's mom, Buffy McGregor St. John, soon to be Buffy McGregor St. John Charmaine, wouldn't dare bring her fiancé, my ex-husband, to the meeting. Would she?

There's always somebody in your life that you need to keep one dimensional. In my life that person is Buffy St. John. No matter that she leads a Girl Scout troop, fund raises for Big Brothers Big Sisters and teaches Sunday school, beautiful, tooth-pick thin, Harvard-educated attorney, Buffy St. John, or The Buffarino as I call her, is as mean as organ meat. And this is who Chad plans to marry and to install as Chickie's step-mother.

I grab another cookie, chewing fast, wondering if there's any way I can pin it all

on Ellie.

Chickie says, "Ellie did it."

And I know, because Chickie is staring at me without blinking, that without a doubt Chickie's thought the whole thing up.

I try to swallow my cookie chew but the stone caught in my throat won't let the mess pass. I cough and spit the wad out into my napkin.

Chickie's got her lips folded in on themselves. Like angry bees, her fingers dart out and land on the back of my hand, pinching. I yank away. "That hurts!"

She squints at me, her lips pursed tight.

"Okay, okay, you're right," I say. "An ant couldn't really do that to me."

"Why?" Chickie says (of course!).

"Because I'd never let it."

Sarah Bell

Green Orange White Distortion



William Reichard

The Vertigo Variations

ver·ti·go (vûr t-gô)*n. pl.* **ver·ti·goes** or **ver·ti·gos**

1.a. The sensation of dizziness. **b.** An instance of such a sensation. **2.** A confused, disoriented state of mind.

[*Middle English, from Latin vertig-, from vertere, to turn; see wer-*² *in Indo-European roots.*]

It was a strange summer, weather-wise and otherwise. It was the summer I woke up dizzy and stayed that way for months. It was a summer of disconnects, breakdowns, and breakthroughs. It started with a slow May spring that turned into a month of almost nonstop June rain. There were major floods all over the US. When July arrived, it came on hard and fast, temperatures shooting into the 90's and 100's and staying there for weeks, dew points reaching tropical proportions above 70 and even 80 degrees. Some days, the local news reported, it was more humid here in Saint Paul, Minnesota than in parts of the Amazon rainforest. No one could, or perhaps wanted to, explain it and none of us knew how to cope with it. We stayed indoors with the AC on high. We ran from air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned malls back to our air-conditioned homes. It reminded me of a week I'd spent in Florida, where all anyone seemed to do was avoid the heat and humidity, and plan where their next meal would be found. Global warming is very real, and apparently, it's going to be very uncomfortable. The once cool north turned into the once hot and humid south. The once hot and humid south was and still is in the middle of the longest drought since the Great Depression. Everywhere across the U.S., wildfires were burning. The world seemed tipped on some strange new axis.

Many in America are experiencing a form of social and political vertigo previously unknown to us. The social and political zeitgeist of the US is in a state of confusion, and though many of us don't want to cope with it, we can, if we must, at least partly explain it. With the election of Barak Obama came a new zeal on the part of most

politicians and political parties. At first this zeal took the form of hope, possibility, the "yes we can" slogan from Obama's campaign posters. Now, it's not so much about sincere hope as it is about attention-grabbing sound bites, the semblance of hope or confidence or courage. But it's not really any of these, and like something out of Orwell, even our language is eroding to the point where political rhetoric doesn't mean anything. Our syntax has lost its balance. I think it's safe to say that our socio-political arena has seen more grandstanding, childish stubbornness, and a refusal to compromise in the last couple of years than this country has seen in the last couple of centuries.

Something essential is broken. I'm not a social scientist, and I can't pretend to speak knowledgably about politics, but I can give witness to what I've seen, what I continue to see and experience, as one citizen of what seems to be a country on the verge. On the verge of what, I can't say. It feels as if we, as a nation, have reached a watershed moment. Everything is up for grabs, and maybe everything has always been and most of us have been too naïve or willfully blind to admit it. Still, none of us can deny what's on the table right now: education, social services, welfare, Social Security, Medicare, almost any safety net designed to catch those who can most easily fall through our societal cracks - children, senior citizens, the differently-abled, the sick, the homeless, anyone in need of the most basic services. These are services that, in many other developed nations, are seen as basic human rights. Yet these programs and many more are being interrogated, underfunded, or eliminated. The ground has shifted under our formerly confident feet and there doesn't seem to be anything safe to hold on to. Feeling dizzy yet?

When I opened my eyes one July morning, looked around in my myopic fashion at the always slightly blurry walls and windows, I realized the room was spinning. I was immobile, but the world around me was in a frenzied orbit. I immediately closed my eyes. I felt dizzy, slightly queasy, my stomach tense like a fist. When I opened my eyes again, the world was swaying, turning a bit more slowly, like some kind of carnival ride.

My first thought was that I had a sinus infection. I'd had sinus trouble in the past, and I suffer from seasonal allergies, so I wasn't worried. I was uncomfortable, yes, and when I forced myself to get out of bed, I felt unsure on my feet. The room was spinning the way it spins when I've had too much to drink. But I hadn't been drinking and the uncomfortable pressure in my nose and forehead that I usually feel when my sinuses are acting up wasn't there. I was just dizzy, and my feet moved awkwardly one in front of the other. I was lost in my own body. Not even the walls of my house seemed familiar anymore; they shifted on me, rearranged themselves when I wasn't there, and sometimes when I entered a room, I'd walk into one. It was disconcerting, but like a lot of men, I assumed that if I ignored it, the condition would go away.

After a week with vertigo, some days so bad I didn't drive for fear of getting into an accident, I knew I had to see my doctor. She's an excellent physician, full of energy and ideas and willing to listen to any number of my crackpot theories regarding health. After a thorough exam and a lot of blood and stool work, she had no idea why I was experiencing vertigo. The best she could do was give me a sheet that outlined a movement called the Epley Maneuver, a series of exercises designed to rebalance the liquid that fills our inner ears and gives us our sense of balance. The idea behind the maneuver is that sometimes this liquid, like a little sea inside our skull, can get out of balance, shift to one side or another, and thus, destroy our sense of equilibrium. Another theory has tiny, microscopic crystals forming in this inner sea, destroying the tranquility necessary for our sense of balance. Whatever the cause of the condition, the maneuver sounded simple enough, and I was willing to try anything. I followed the step by step guide carefully, twice a day moving through the routine that instructs you to turn your head first in one direction, hold the position for a minute, then turn your head in another direction. After lying down and moving your head a couple more times, you repeat the maneuver three times and you're done. It's a little like Tai Chi for the equilibrium-impaired. The maneuver provided some relief each time I did it, but after an hour or two, my world became topsy-turvy again.

In 1982 director Godfrey Reggio released his groundbreaking documentary, *Koyaanisqatsi*. Composed of slow motion and time-lapse footage of natural and social landscapes around the US, the film explores how we, as a nation, have lost our sense of self, our connection to the natural world, and our ability to connect with one another. The title, a Hopi word that means "life out of balance," is the central theme around which the film is constructed. Without narration or subtitles, the film relies on purely visual evidence to illustrate a point that should not be lost on anyone living in the contemporary world - we exist in an age of extreme anxiety, immeasurable speed, unstoppable sprawl, an age of pure vertigo. We've degraded the environment to a point of complete instability. The one thing we used to be able to count on, the earth itself, the land upon which we live, has become de-centered, a planet dizzily wobbling out of orbit.

The political landscape in the US has been polluted, or at least compromised, from the start, but it feels like the last twenty-five years have been the most politically toxic our country has ever endured. After the corruption of the Bush era, the start of two illegal and unfunded wars, after the election of Barak Obama and the viciously partisan nature of the last round of legislative elections, many of us are feeling exhausted, even sullied, by politics. State government here in Minnesota was shut down for over two weeks because the Republican-controlled House and Senate wouldn't negotiate with the Democratic governor. Over twenty-two thousand state employees were laid off without pay, and thousands of other workers, engaged in contract business with the state, were also out of work. This, in a period when unemployment is already dangerously high. People here were outraged. When this same contagion of non-cooperation and lack of compromise threatened to spread to the Federal level, people across the country were angry, in shock, and left wondering if any politician should or could be trusted. Every member of the House and Senate claimed to be representing the will of the people, but poll after poll proved that none of our voices were being heard. The country nearly ground to a halt, and even with a compromised reached just hours shy of a shutdown, we're still feeling the effects of the dysfunction.

Life out of balance. There is no better way to describe the current national zeitgeist.

In W. G. Sebald's first novel, *Vertigo*, published in English in 1999, the author creates a narrator, a kind of doppelganger, a restless wanderer who crisscrosses Europe and finally ends up in England, where he relates his life story to Sebald the novelist. Part of what the narrator struggles with is a growing awareness that life may not have any clear purpose, no discernable patterns that might make it easier to cope with the seeming absurdities most of us face at one time or another. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator says, "...far from becoming clearer, things now appeared to me more incomprehensible than ever. The more images I gathered from the past... the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling." The premise may sound a bit convoluted, but the outcome, and the novel itself, is wondrous. Like every Sebald book, *Vertigo* asks the reader to work. The title describes the sensation of the character/author as he travels from one place to the next, trying to make sense of an inherently unsensible world, and it describes the sensation the reader may experience while first reading and then thinking about the book. This temporary sense of dislocation isn't necessarily unpleasant. Reading need not be, as Barthes calls it, a great "unpleasure." I read in order to better understand the world and my place in it. I read in order to locate myself within a rubric of experience and belief and location. This isn't always easy work, but it's rewarding.

I finished the novel only a few weeks before my own encounter with vertigo set in. I tried, in the first dizzy days, to think about what Sebald's narrator experienced, what he did or at least could have learned. I was trying to make sense of my own experience of dislocation, the change in the physical reality of my body, and like any good reader, I looked to books for solace. I can't say if having read the novel prior to the onset of my vertigo helped make the experience any less disorienting, but it did give me a certain comfort to know I was in such esteemed, if metaphorical, company.

As I contemplated the narrator in *Vertigo*, I remembered the opening pages of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, first published in English in 1998. In this book, Sebald's narrator (and isn't he the narrator, in one sense or another, in all of his works?) spends a year walking through the English county of Suffolk. A year to the day after he begins his journey, he is hospitalized in Norwich, his back injured, his body immobilized. And it's because of this physical dislocation that the author is able to dislocate, in a sense, his mind and his memory, and go wandering again across the countryside and across time and space. Sebald was a great exile. He fled Germany and made a life in England. Yet, his imagination never settled, and his indignation with his own people and their too-easily achieved post-war amnesia flows powerfully through all of his work. For Sebald, whether through his self-identified narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*, or through the story of Max Ferber, a Holocaust refugee, in *The Emigrants*, looking back at history is essential, but it's also vertiginous, whether literally or metaphorically. The past, for the author and his narrators, is a giant chasm into which he might fall if he stares down into it for too long, yet his preoccupation with that very past is what keeps him there on the dizzy edge of the precipice, always staring down (and back) into something from which he cannot, in any essential way, make sense.

Perhaps making sense isn't the point of Sebald's work. There is always much to be learned from reflecting on history, and the practice has been a profession for two or three thousand years (longer if you see the Bible and earlier religious texts as forms of history). What Sebald found when he stared down into his own chasm was a history of destruction, and a mean-tempered unwillingness on the part of the Western world to accept responsibility for its own actions, or even acknowledge that "history," as we teach it to each new generation, is much more complex, much messier, than we want it to be. When I look at the current state of my own country, I see this same unwillingness, this same stubborn insistence on seeing the world in simple, binary terms. We are good. They (whoever "they" happen to be at the moment) are bad. We are right. They are wrong. There's no room for compromise here, and somewhere along the line, we seem to have forgotten the fact that consensus doesn't mean we all get our own way. My own chasm, the dizzying void into which I find myself staring more and

more every day, isn't my country's past. It's my country's future. Without compromise, without cooperation, nothing happens, nothing changes. We stagnate and ultimately, we die. Yet how can we, as a nation, fall into such inert ruin when our arms, our hands, our numberless fingers, seem to be everywhere, to touch virtually every place on earth? America is everywhere, so where might I go (assuming I'm seeking to exile myself from my country as Sebald did from his) where I'd be free from this nation into which I was born? Nowhere. And really, Sebald never left his own Germany behind. He exiled himself to England in 1970, but the creative product of his life, all that we are left with since the man himself died, is one long, beautiful meditation on the past. Germany lived inside of him, no matter where he went, just as the United States lives inside of me. We humans are so full of contradictions, so afraid of real complexity. It's no wonder we're all suffering from our own, personal forms of vertigo.

Alfred Hitchcock's classic film, *Vertigo*, features a dizzy Jimmy Stewart, an American Everyman, a former policeman who barely escapes death after falling from a building while chasing a criminal across San Francisco's rooftops. His balance is further compromised when he's hired, in his new role as a private detective, to follow the wife of a wealthy client. This wife, Kim Novak, is in fact no wife at all, not even the blonde she appears to be, but instead a brunette waitress hired by the client to impersonate his wife, to trick Jimmy Stewart into thinking the woman is insane and suicidal. Jimmy falls in love with this illusion and when she seems to plunge to her death from a mission bell tower, his mind goes right over the edge with her. The movie is filled with vertiginous camerawork, featuring a famous shot inside the bell tower where the lens pulls into a full close-up zoom-in while the camera itself is pulled rapidly back and up the tower. The effect is startling. It gives visual life to Stewart's inner demons, thus allowing the viewer to experience, albeit secondhand, the character's disorientation.

The plot itself is a bit dizzying, with Novak playing two roles, her hair dyed blonde, then brown, then blonde again, her wardrobe and even her identity a cavalcade of fantasies worn for the men around her. In one famous sequence designed by John Ferren, Stewart has a feverish vertigo dream, and we see shots of his body in freefall,

of Kim Novak (as the suicidal wife) plunging to her death, of a painting in the Palace of the Legion of Honor coming to life. It's heady stuff, and intended to replicate both a nightmare and an attack of the condition from which the movie takes its name. I've always liked the movie, despite its obvious misogyny, but I'm not sure that the title is completely accurate. What Stewart suffers from, following his fall, isn't vertigo. It's acrophobia, a fear of heights. He experiences a sense of vertigo when he finds himself looking out the windows of tall buildings or inside dark, dangerous mission bell towers, but this vertiginous feeling is only a symptom of his real problem - post-traumatic stress brought on by his accident, and his own inability to deal with his past, his loss of identity, and his double loss of Novak. Personal history, filled as it is with doubts and demons, is a precipice Stewart, much like Sebald's narrators, doesn't want to, but must, approach.

Stewart's real trauma is almost spiritual in nature, a kind of vertiginous dissociation brought on first by his fall, and then by his double encounter with Novak. After his fall (and we must bear in mind there are many ways of falling), he can no longer be the man he thought he was - a police detective, a man in charge, a man at the top of his game. His accident brings him low, first into a hospital bed where he is ministered to by the intelligent but stylishly frumpy Midge, and then into a somewhat dubious position as a private detective. He's no longer a man in charge of the public good, no officer of the peace, but now a gun for hire, a man who has to take whatever work comes his way, unsavory as that might be. There's little room for pride in such a position, but there's also little distance left to fall. His vertigo, on this level, is caused by his loss of identity. No longer a cop, barely even a man when read along a continuum that places a high value on that kind of militaristic identity. Just when he's feeling like he's hit a low point, Novak enters the picture, and though her character seems to save him, temporarily, from slipping down into that final void, his association with her ultimately destroys him, showing him just how low he can go. His double loss of Novak, first as the suicidal wife and then as the transformed waitress accidentally knocked to her death by a well-meaning nun, strips him of every illusion. He's not in charge. He's never been in charge. He was a patsy first and a delusional lover second, and he

couldn't hold his woman in either scenario. He's lost Midge to a dizzying, bottle-blonde dream, and in the end he's no one. Not a cop, not a private eye, not a lover, not even a friend. He's alone, and his lack of context and connection is the true source of his vertigo.

My favorite carnival ride has always been the Tilt-O-Whirl, that bright red contraption with circular caged seats that spins around and around a track that undulates up and down, all the while the seat-cages themselves spinning like small planets around a lurid funhouse sun. As a child, I'd watch the ride in progress, before I myself boarded, to see which seat spun the fastest and the most. Once on the ride, I'd thrill to the centrifugal force that pinned me back against the mesh wire headrest. I don't recall leaving the ride even once feeling dizzy. Vertigo was something unknown to me, except when I'd jump on a particular playground toy, a small orange machine upon which I'd spin faster and faster until I had no balance left. I'd often ride on this toy immediately after snacking on milk and cookies, and the result was never good. I was banned, finally, from riding on the toy after a teacher grew tired of cleaning up from the playground sand what remained of my daily snack. It's hard to imagine, now, getting on any kind of carnival ride. I feel as if I'm always on one, or, to be more precise, as if I've always just gotten off of one. My body is my own unbalanced toy, orbiting an invisible sun, spinning always faster and faster.

Over a year later, I still experience vertigo. There are days when I wake and feel almost normal again, though I'm no longer sure what normal is. There are days when I wake and my stomach is in knots. It's hard, sometimes, to know whether I feel sick or hungry so I have to make myself eat. I occasionally bump into walls and doorframes. I drive, but cautiously. I feel better now than I did when the symptoms first occurred, but I don't feel like myself. Something inside of me has shifted in a fundamental way, and I'm starting to think it may never shift back again. Is this state of *unbliss*, this slight dizziness, this disorientation, my new normal? Perhaps this is the way I've always felt, emotionally, subconsciously, and now this emotion has come to the surface to play

itself out through the vehicle of my body. Perhaps this isn't the new normal because there was never any real normal in the first place. I've always tried, as best I can, to confront the kinds of ideas and emotions that might better stay buried. I'm a writer, after all, and what lies hidden just under the surface or deep in the subconscious is my stock in trade. I prefer to live in a fully wakened, if oftentimes dizzying, world, where I can continue to exhume the past in order to better understand the future. The future. I run toward it, my dizzy limbs tangled, my comprehension twisting. What is it I hope to find there? An America that can fix its own failing axis, right its orbit so its citizens aren't stumbling around the globe, running into walls, wars, and trouble? A society that cannot only face complexity, but embrace it? Perhaps I'm too much of a dreamer. Sebald wrote book after book and though he enlightened many of us, he never succeeded in repairing his relationship to the past. His books are filled with beautiful, grainy photographs and if you stare at them long enough, you can just about make out the details. Would these provide a key? The answers that man sought? My own world is spinning, lopsided and undependable. If it would ever stop spinning long enough, I might be better able to see it for what it is, what it could be, and perhaps then, I'd understand.

Sarah Bell

Pen Eater



Karl Williams

The Campaign

"Vous savez, évidemment, les magasins du Marais. . ."

She squeezed in the question with a smile.

"Certainment!" said the other woman, also with a grin.

And on they went, happily conversing at a volume that appeared to be necessary with all these people and all this activity. The place, local headquarters of the candidate for president, was a madhouse. As they spoke, the first continued assembling handouts on a table; the other searched for a place to post a notice on a cork-board on the wall.

Not twenty minutes before I'd walked in with Dominique, but I'd lost sight of her by this time. She'd told me on the way from the car that her family had for generations owned the French equivalent of a delicatessen in Paris. I couldn't have nudged her, of course, even if she'd still been nearby—I'd just met her—(I'm not a nudger anyway) but Wouldn't it be great, I thought to myself, if she chimed in with the real McCoy, so to speak. These two women's re-visiting of their language acquisition seemed completely innocuous, but to me it also smacked of something else: of that bodily deportment of the rich; that glowing health; that exuberant, barely unconscious refusal to acknowledge the troubles most of the rest of humanity are forced to confront daily. I couldn't stomach it – though I knew it was prejudice on my part, clear and simple, and that there was no way even to imagine what either of these woman would turn out to be, if I were ever to speak to them.

. . . when (as they say) up popped Dominique and with an open, friendly smile entered the conversation.

And then it was, "Une vrai française!" But far from betraying the kind of embarrassment I might imagine in myself in such a situation (though I knew that, even if I'd had such ease with another language, I would never have displayed it in such a way . . .)—in fact, as if embarrassment were a response neither one of them had ever experienced in any situation—these two were completely unruffled. They welcomed

Dominique as simply a widening of their circle: in France, probably, they'd known the wealthy French, of course—and wealth trumps any conceivable divide.

But Dominique's open, friendly manner, as I became fully aware of it, had the effect on me of a mild admonishment. That is, simply, she was European and her simplicity and her appreciation of life had centuries and centuries behind it as a kind of ballast, a solidity in light of which these two women and myself were thrown together as, in effect, inconsequential products of an adolescent culture.

Dominique and her husband and a young Russian man and myself had been listed together as a canvassing team. That morning, since I lived in the area then, I'd driven us to the neighborhood we'd been assigned to. Harold, Dominique's husband – you only exchanged first names, apparently: I was new to this sort of thing myself – Harold told me he was originally from California. The three of them were meteorological scientists and had come in from an adjacent state for the day. The Russian had arrived in the US just two days before and, when it was evident that Harold and Dominique would work together, he and I teamed up. Harold tore the print-out in half and off our two teams went to encourage voters to come out to their polling places.

Generally, Vlad and I split up so as to cover our area as quickly as possible. But occasionally, when there were more addresses listed on one side of the block, one of us would cross the street and we'd cover the last few houses together before moving on. And as we waited together for the next person to answer their door, Vlad would shake his head. And then he would smile at me and shrug his shoulders. There was no time to go into it, but what he was thinking seemed clear to me: How the hell did I wind up here? Doing this!

The day before, at the party headquarters, Nancy, my wife, had spoken to a man with a British accent who'd told her that he'd come over specifically for the week to help. And then there was the woman from the World Bank the day before that; and the world traveler for the Smithsonian; and the Texas lawyer who had moved to Mexico for two years to learn the language for his practice. What we were all doing – what had sucked me and many another ordinarily uninvolved American into it and what had as well

become an international effort, or at least one with a distinctly international flavor—what we were attempting to do was, to put it colloquially, “T’row da bum out. . .”—and replace him with someone half-decent.

This particular bum, it seemed to many of us, may well have been enlisted and primed for a role as puppet, but in any event, he’d taken on with the presidency what to him—or to his puppeteers—must’ve presented itself as a natural responsibility: to do everything possible by way of national policy and federal appointments to further the cause and feather the nests of the apparently reincarnated robber barons who were in the process of trying to take over the world. . .again. The election which had put him into office four years before had, as we all knew, been stolen, pure and simple. And so this present effort, the Americans among us knew, had also much to do with restoring the democracy we all felt was in grave danger of being—or had in fact already been—lost. Many of us wondered, I was certain, if this election was in reality already over and done with, despite all our time and labor. I myself (at least) also wondered if plans were being hatched to secure the White House indefinitely: to leave behind the lies that had been told to right-wing conservatives and to fundamentalists of seemingly southern origin in order to cinch the last election and simply to. . .What? Change the constitution? No, too involved and difficult. Co-opt the military? No, too far-fetched. What, then? Revisit rule by king, even if newly labeled? Certainly it was all far-fetched and ridiculous. But hadn’t we already been subdued by television and then, further, divided and conquered by the increasingly splintered, the cunningly specialized marketplace which offered—and which most of us seemed to be lapping up unexamined—such bestowers of “empowerment” and “personal freedom” as video recorders and computer games and virtual online worlds. Hadn’t we left ourselves open for a newly conceived coup?

That afternoon the four of us returned to the streets in a different section of the city with a new list of doorbells to ring. Again, Harold tore the sheets in half and he and Dominique went off with their pages. Though I’d known them only a few hours, still it struck me – had struck me immediately, really – the way their relationship, as they say, was constituted. How could he speak to her in such a dismissive and condescending

manner? And why did she tolerate it? She was French. . .

Vlad had sandy, sparse hair and a tentative smile which might have been showing somewhat greying teeth. He and I set about covering the addresses on the four or five blocks around us. As in the morning, many people were not home and I wondered, as I looked for the next address on the list, where the owner might be. Probably at work: this was a Monday. But maybe at a store. The doctor's? Walking a dog? Or a child? Vacation? Car repair? Maybe this person didn't own the house but rented. The ones I did find at home were, mostly, polite. They listened to my spiel, took the literature, closed the door. One or two proved to be as enthusiastic as I was myself. But one man explained to me at some length why he was no longer—and would never even consider being ever again in his lifetime—a member of the party we were working for . . . or of any party, for that matter. He'd had a job, I was to understand. (An easy job? I wondered.) A good job. (A job that entailed little more than the receiving of a paycheck at the end of every week?) And one day he no longer had that job and his ward politico was unable to secure him another position. And his loyalty, such as it had been, he thereafter and in perpetuity withdrew.

At another house, this one at the end of a block, Vlad and I were greeted. . . suddenly. . .as if we'd cranked some box we hadn't known we were cranking (the listing read "John"—so this might conceivably have been a "Jack")—we'd barely knocked at this door when a man seemed to pop out at us. And he was screaming. And his screaming seemed to have begun before he'd opened his door, perhaps as he made his way toward the door, maybe even with the first note of his doorbell. Maybe he'd been shouting at whoever happened to be facing him for years. He roared at us in a distinctly belligerent tone, as if Vlad and I were personally responsible for the mess the world was in. Apparently this mess he perceived – not that I was unaware of it myself—this current mess somehow always had and would always exist. But at the same time, he seemed to be saying (yelling. . .), it had also been created by the candidate we were working for. It seemed never to have occurred to him that his reasoning, whatever it was, might be called into question. His hostility was all the rationale he needed, as far as he was concerned. However his name had made its way onto our list, he had, it was

thoroughly evident, a long-standing and marked distaste for the man we were working for. He alternately snarled and bellowed. And it was so loud that he couldn't possibly have heard Vlad's unmistakable accent. . . or he might actually have followed through on the assault his manner clearly threatened us with.

When we'd been to each address on our list that was easy to find, we walked first in one, then in another direction searching for all the remaining addresses. Then we stood puzzled—I the more so, as I'd been living in this city for more than just a few years. I took one more deep breath, so to speak, and looked around one more time, wondering what I might suggest we do next. The area we'd been assigned to included a wide expanse of parking lots across what was one of the wider intersections in the city. I hadn't really considered that area. But there was a structure over there. . . And now it finally came to me: all these other addresses were not individual houses—they were apartments inside that building, inside that high-rise.

It was obvious how to get into the building physically—there was a short, half-circle driveway from which a sidewalk ran to the main door—but the man we encountered in the small lobby inside, perched on a stool behind a high narrow counter with several rows of keys on the wall behind him, made our actual entrance a bit problematic. Who had we come to see? Well, we had a list of people. . . And why did we want to go inside? To urge people to come out and vote. Oh no—that sort of thing wasn't allowed. In the past there'd been soliciting and Halloweening and Christmas caroling. . . —and the residents didn't want any more of it. I asked to talk to the manager; the man hesitated; the manager happened by; and we gained admission.

Though our elevator ride was brief, still I had time to wonder about the reason behind the manager's decision. Did he have a predisposition toward our party—or just a marked clarity of thought when it came to right and wrong?

Our pages listed a few more addresses on the fifth floor than on the others, so we decided to start there. When we stepped out of the elevator, the hallway stretched, poorly lit and empty and silent, in both directions. My father had recently moved to a

retirement community, as his was called, and many of the apartment doors along the hallways in his building were decorated with silk flowers and handmade hangings. None of that here. But this did seem to be a building with the same sort of purpose: the lists provided birthdates as well as names and addresses. We turned left. Perhaps because of the difficulty we'd had getting in, now we approached each door together. And as we worked our way from one door on our list to the next, the content of my imaginings, when there was no answer, narrowed considerably. Now I had almost every absent person visiting their children or grandchildren.

On the sixth floor, as we approached the seventh or eighth door, Vlad suggested that we not bother to knock. For a moment I didn't understand. And then, when he pointed to the birth-date, I thought I understood. But then again I guessed that perhaps I didn't. He seemed to be saying that the person residing behind this particular door was simply too old to bother with. I was stunned—both by this supposition (if this was indeed what he meant) and by the impossibility of my ever ascertaining whether this take on things was of a cultural or a personal origin. I said that I was going to knock "anyway" (I had no desire to challenge his assumption, such as I believed it to be: we were a team. . .) and that I could handle this one myself. He stood next to me as he had before and the person we met—it was a much longer wait this time—the woman we met was all smiles and vague agreement. She took our papers and assured us that by all means she would get to the polls—if she could find a ride.

On the ninth floor, at the end of the hall, a door on our list had been left ajar. When we were unable to raise anyone with the bell or with knocking, I tried calling. And, when that didn't work either, I pushed the door open the rest of the way and stepped gingerly into a nicely furnished, wide-windowed apartment.

"Hello!" I called, "Hello! Is anybody here?"

And then I took another few steps and, just behind a tan couch with some particularly frilly cushions, I called again.

Finally I heard, from another part of the apartment down the short hall to my right, "Yes, yes! Come back, please. . ."

I realized now that I was by myself – and thought I understood perfectly Vlad's

decision to remain in the hallway outside.

The woman was sitting up primly, in a graciously commanding pose. It was immediately apparent to me that she must have been helped to the easy chair in which she sat at some point earlier in the day – perhaps just within the past hour. The way that only the upper portion of her body seemed to be in her control, and the table at her elbow arranged with what looked to be every conceivable item she might want or need during the next several hours—I took in the situation at a glance and these were the elements which led me to my conclusion.

Her white hair was perfectly done. Her clothing, immaculate and colorful and stylish, gave you the impression that she planned to have company—or to be company—shortly. She smiled almost as if she'd been waiting for me. But I suspected she'd requested that her door be left open because she was expecting a relative perhaps, or maybe a friend of hers who was, perhaps, younger and so able to get about more easily. And I supposed that the person she'd asked to leave the door open (whoever it was. . . I assumed it had been a woman. . . maybe a black woman. . . but maybe not. . .) was the same person who'd assisted her in dressing and then in settling in on her chair.

She listened attentively to the words I'd spoken many times by then. And when she responded it was with an enthusiasm that was remarkable: open and far-reaching and spirited and of firm resolve.

"Of course I'll be voting," she said, "We must work together to do what needs to be done."

And I left feeling that, no matter whom we met now or what happened next, this woman, so personable; so courageous and kind; so much more positive and purposeful and perceptive than anyone else we'd spoken to that day—I felt that this woman had, in some small but perhaps crucial way, affected my own perception, my own appreciation, and so my own future—my life—in a way that was akin to how Nancy had touched me when I first came to know her so many years before.

Next Vlad and I went to the third floor and then on seven the evening manager located us and requested—in a way designed to render opposition unthinkable—that we

leave the building. Outside, as we walked to the corner where we'd agreed to rendezvous with Harold and Dominique, I imagined that this man had based his decision to oust us, not on any political conviction or on any considered reading of the building's regulations, but simply on his general outlook—he'd kicked us out on little more than a whim.

Harold and Dominique were nowhere in sight and, as we waited, there was time to talk. I was eager to feel what I could of the country Vlad had left. But I knew nothing really of Russia's internal workings or of Russia's current role in world affairs. Not enough to offer an opinion, certainly; not even enough to ask a question. And what if he'd come from some part of Russia that had broken off after the wall fell? And given what we were about today, wouldn't politics be the only acceptable topic? In any event, Tolstoy didn't seem quite an appropriate subject and, since the nagging question I'd had for years—about these "stoves" that many Russian writers described people sleeping on or behind in previous times—since this question seemed such an odd one to ask out of the blue, I fumbled.

But Vlad, it seemed, had come to an understanding of—or a justification for—the work in which he'd found himself involved. Maybe Harold and Dominique had picked him up at the airport. They'd told me he'd come here to work with them, though I couldn't have said how closely—perhaps it was only at the same facility. Possibly he was staying with them until he could find his own place. And probably he'd felt some obligation to assent when they'd asked him to come along for the day. In any event, here he was. And apparently, just within the last hour or so, he'd discovered what he believed to be a legitimate reason for what he'd done today. Using the name of the then current leader in his country, he said that Russia had started down a path similar to the one the United States was on. And then he said he thought that our man might somehow put their man back on a more acceptable path. That was why he'd come. That was it.

As for me, I was in a situation similar to Vlad's, though I little realized it at the time. But when I began to think back on it deliberately. . . . What had I been doing that

day?

For Nancy, I believe, it was straightforward. She wasn't regularly active in contests such as this one—the way she worked her job left her little free time. But the current state of affairs, with such a man—such men and women—in charge of the country, demanded her involvement. Still there was something more. For Nancy that present urgency was paired with a lifelong interest. Since her childhood, when she'd followed "the news" with her father (as that phrase has until recently been used)—since she'd been a child, politics and the workings of government have been for Nancy almost an obsession. She's always known who the players are—all of them: local, state, national, and international; she knows how things work—and how they're supposed to work; and she understands and is perfectly comfortable with the role she can play when she chooses to get involved - as she had two years before for a local candidate. She would have pitched in anyway but, as I say, she was also already heavily predisposed.

But I've been all but oblivious right along. What was happening to all of us then—here in the US, and to everyone in the world, really—was plainly, overwhelmingly disastrous. And so when I decided to do something about it, as they say—Nancy had worked a day or two before I joined her—my deciding to take an active role made perfect sense. But still, beyond the obvious, for me to there seemed to be something more as well. . . .

Sometime during that day, what with what I was seeing and hearing and in how I was reacting to it all, at some point I knew I had the makings of a story. And so when it was over with, I made some notes and then I put them aside for a later time. And now—some years have gone by—I've come back to my notes. . . .

I take up the task and set about working it through. But when I reach what I'd believed would be the end of this story—that conversation with Vlad, such as it was—I know that the story isn't yet complete. And so I continue to work, to go over and over what I've written. In a sense what I'm doing is to revisit with intent, or, as you might say, to make an assault, on this unknown element—an ending. I've continued to work and finally now - though I've yet to learn to trust that it will—finally, I believe, it's come

to me. . .

. . .that half-open door at the end of that hall in the high-rise. . . The building itself was a kind of fortress and within that fortress were housed those many little apartment-fortresses. Wasn't that open door a bit remarkable? One simply didn't leave one's castle gate ajar. How was it that that door had been left open?

I have not even the beginning of an answer to this question.

Now I've got it surrounded. . .

OK—so what if I were to revisit that building. . . Immediately this thought crosses my mind, I realize—in the same instant, really—I know that I would never attempt such a thing. I'm no detective. I'd never be able to find out anything at all. That door seems more an opening gambit for some sort of fantasy. Again and again I've been told this same story: . . . a book . . . a film. . . a hero. . . tasks to be faced . . . a door—maybe not an actual door—just some sort of threshold. Then the struggle; then the hero wins out; and then, of course, the happily-ever-after, as they say. And then, the day after. . . —well the story never exactly goes into that. . .

For a while there I thought I was on to something: real-life doors. . . metaphors. . . craving for what lies on the other side—the "terrible tug" (as I tried calling it) that draws you to cross a threshold. . . And the "tantalizing notion" about what will be gained. . . A grasp, finally, of history (what has happened. . . what is happening. . . what will happen) or of . . . eternity. ("History" and "eternity" were two half-decent terms, I thought. . .) And the end of it all—always vague or, if not vague, unsatisfactorily imagined. . .those happily-ever-after's. And that new door that always seems to appear—in place of the happily-ever-after. . .

But all that won't do. It wasn't exactly. . . —well, it just didn't do it. And so, whether you'd say I've "come full circle"—or whether maybe you wouldn't bother saying that—in any event, after what you might call a reconnoitering mission, I've returned with my report.

Simply put: Another door, another doubt.

All I've got really is that open door. Could that be the crux of it? But just the

door—not what might lie inside. The door itself: that instant of pause, of not yet—of never—being able to know. Not anything whatsoever—for certain. Never. Not ever. Could that be that it, precisely? Could that be where it all comes down? Is that where I need to make a stand?

Michael Ryan

The Idea (Whose Time Has Come)

The snake has nothing to do with this story. The fact that it crossed my path that night as I walked to my townhouse, its head lifted and turned, forked tongue licking the air, then slivered into the bushes, is not pertinent to what I'm about to tell you. The snake isn't a Biblical symbol, cheesy metaphor, or literary device for anything. It's just a snake.

This story is about getting fucked over. My idea was brilliant. It's still brilliant, I think, in the way all groundbreaking ideas earthquake the foundations the middle class teeter on. I was tired of teetering. My idea would put me on equal footing.

I'm a declared Biology major and college drop-out, divorcee with a kid, Nascar lover, amateur chef, fat-ass, exterminator by profession with one original idea in his head. I bought the costume online, envelopes from the Dollar Store, and bred the termites in my basement. I scoped out wealthy suburban neighborhoods in between appointments for Randy, the exterminator I worked for. My burglar friends used this technique to get a feel for the place—does the housewife go to the gym every Thursday morning, husband work late every Tuesday? What about the neighbors—the younger the better; old people are nosy.

I'd submit a phony schedule request to Randy, and when the appointment came, I'd tell him the client wasn't there. Easy enough. I'd put on that stupid UPS uniform, ring the bell (the housewife had already left for the gym), take a step back, ring the bell again. When she didn't answer, I shoved the envelope into the door's mail slot, squeezed the sides and shook, making sure all those little eggs and termites escaped. In the crease of her door, I left my own personal business card that I ordered for free online. A few months later, I'd leave my card again, and one month after that. The bugs took a half-year, sometimes less, to start eating the house.

You're probably wondering if I studied bugs in school. I didn't. My best friend at the time convinced me to drop out with one semester left because he had an idea for a

no-fail business. Hot dogs. Not a stand, but a restaurant. "Where can you buy a hot dog these days?" He had a point. He also had the capital. After three slow months, I burned the mound of leftover buns and didn't speak to him until he bailed me out of jail for tax evasion, unpaid parking and speeding tickets, and unpaid child support.

The night I left the gym-rat housewife's half-eaten house with my \$500 deposit, I saw that shiny black snake with its yellow bands slithering across my path. I looked it up in one of my old Biology books. A king snake. Three or four feet long. Non-poisonous. Why did I care? What did it matter to me?

I was always indifferent to snakes. Once, we had a reptile guy visit our middle school. I touched the snakes' scaly skins, but didn't want to hold them, and certainly didn't scream like the little girls. A snake was a snake. That was it. This particular king snake had nothing to do with Randy showing up at my door the next day, hysterical crying, dumped by his partner.

Randy wore these flowery short-sleeved Hawaiian shirts no matter the weather. He was as fat as I was. "You're the only one I can talk to." He handed me a bottle of wine in a paper bag with two wine glasses, blew his nose in a hanky, walked right in.

"I'm busy," I told the back of his head.

He walked through the narrow hallway, passing the basement door. He turned. "What are you doing?"

Trying to keep him away from four years' worth of termites in the basement, that's what.

I followed him on his own personal tour through my dining room with the fake brick wall that I hated, the kitchen overflowing with pots and pans half-filled with my culinary concoctions, and back to the entryway. "Where do you entertain?" he asked.

"The living room." I never entertained. Even my kid. Once a month, we met at Chuck E. Cheese or the park.

"You told me you play poker."

I told Randy some things that would make him think I was a friendly guy to keep him off the trail that I'm not. I was his only employee, and supposedly one of his few friends.

"With a fold-up card table." I pointed to the area behind my recliner.

Randy squeezed past me since two fat people can't fit in the same hallway, and plopped himself on my loveseat where I liked to curl up with a romance novel (a guilty pleasure I buy online using the credit card under my ex-wife's name), or watch a crime show. I put the wine and glasses on the coffee table, sat on my recliner. We faced the new 52" flat screen TV I bought with the proceeds from my last customer. On Randy's salary alone, I couldn't afford it. Luckily, the new sectional couch wasn't coming for three weeks. I often complained to Randy about my gouging ex-wife, a saved-by-Jesus Christian who prayed that her god will pick my pocket or send a snake from the Garden of fucking Eden to mess with my psyche.

Randy ran his hands through his sweaty red hair. "We were together 14 years. I found e-mails between him and some Spanish boy."

"That snake!" The words tumbled out, spilling into the air and making my stomach turn. I never use that expression. I turned on the TV.

"You don't know what it's like to be in love like this." Randy dropped his head in his hands, elbows on his knees.

"I was married for three years," I said, shifting my eyes between Rachel Ray and the basement door in the hallway. "We dated for seven before that."

Randy looked up, hands cupped in front of him. "He cheated on me!" Pre-cry, his face scrunched up like a mouse. He hadn't shaved his red stubble.

I opened the end-table drawer for the bottle-opener that I used most nights, poured Randy a glass of wine.

"What did you say to him?" I asked. Were my s's becoming sibilant? Sssay? Randy was still looking for answers in his hands so I privately practiced my s's, analyzing the different hissing sounds made by moving my lower jaw.

"Don't come back." He took the full glass by the stem, careful not to spill more of the wine I had already splashed on the table, sipping like he was drinking hot soup. His tears stoppered up, pinky lifted in that stereotypical way. "It's my house. He doesn't work. He can go live on the hacienda with that twink."

"Move on. I did." The red wine made three circles on the glass table, like a

Venn diagram.

He placed the wine next to the circles, stood up. He peered into the TV, putting his hands on his knees. "This is nice. Where'd you get it?"

"Sam's Club," I said, standing. "On sale." I ordered it from the distributor because I don't trust people who work in retail. I can even surf the web on it. Watch porn.

He ran his finger along its base. "Why don't you show me the rest of your house?"

Couldn't he read my body language? I didn't want him here. I'd rather shit my pants. I'd rather he shit *his* pants and I'd wear them. "I haven't cleaned."

His laugh squeaked, like a dog's chew-toy. "I can't believe you're embarrassed. You've seen my office." He patted my shoulder. The basement door was too close.

I stared at him. Hard. Tried to sound scary. "I'm embarrassed," I said, teeth clenched, lips pursed, s's hissing. I had been arrested before.

He raised one eyebrow in confusion, then opened the door to the basement. Before he could turn on the light, I grabbed his wrist.

"There's something I haven't told you." I tried to steer him back to the couch, but he didn't budge. One fat man can't move another. That's why, in movies, fighting fat guys always fall down together. "I like kinky stuff."

He was taken aback, staring at me through face fat, with those beady little things. "Like what?" He pulled his arm away from mine.

"Whips and slings."

He leaned against the doorjamb, thumb covering a hole I never noticed. He stuck his pinky finger in the hole, pulled out a chip of wood that fell to the floor.

I balled up my fist. "It's an old house."

He inspected the hole closer, shoved his pinky inside. "Looks like termites."

I would've punched him in the back of the neck, but he grabbed his bottle of wine. "I'll call him," he said, heading down the hallway.

"Who?" I followed.

"Vern." He opened my front door. "My partner?"

"Good idea." I leaned against my half-open door. "Second chances."

He stood outside his SUV, one foot in and one foot out. "Yeah." He lifted his fatness into the driver's seat. "Maybe a second chance." He slammed the door shut. Backed away.

Before I woke the next day, there was a knock on my door. The cops. They had a search warrant. They found my uniform, business cards, termites, and leather sling in my basement. Randy must have told on me.

Two military-looking cops led me, handcuffed, to their squad car. One neighbor looked through half-pulled curtains, but it was the snake peeking out of the bushes that made me lean back, press my feet against the sidewalk. The cops pushed me so hard that I almost fell off the curb. I tried to wiggle my arms free, but they were strong and young.

The snake stuck out its tongue. I stuck out my tongue in retaliation, gave it a raspberry. When the cop-car door closed, the only thing left in my arsenal was to scream through the caged partition, loudly in vain, "Fucking snake!"

Sarah Bell

Spriggan



Danusha Goska

Who's Afraid of Ralph Waldo Emerson?

A newly-minted humanities PhD, I was receiving rejection letters that reported applicants in the hundreds. Two days before the fall semester began, I unearthed a part-time, temporary gig, teaching sophomore literature at a community college. My new boss handed me a syllabus. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" was at its top. I grinned from ear to ear. Surely this was serendipity.

The first time I had read Emerson's thunderous exhortation to individualism was, I suspect, like some people's first experience of sex. "Self-Reliance" had been the quickening lightning bolt in my primeval soup; it was the permission I'd been waiting for all my life to value myself, and rely on myself, no apologies, no regrets. I couldn't wait to teach it.

One of my students, a prison guard and weight lifter, brought the text to class, placed it on his desk, and began pounding with his closed fist. "'Imitation is suicide'? This makes no sense," he shouted.

"It's a metaphor," I said.

Response: a blank stare.

"You have to understand metaphorical truth v. literal truth," I went on. "Otherwise, for example, you'd never understand why some Christians believe in Creationism, and others in Evolution."

This time his blank stare was downright hostile.

This student wanted to be a police officer. "This is relevant," I insisted. I described a recent exposé on the abuse of Taser guns by police. Elderly women and other defenseless suspects had been shot repeatedly. A police investigator told PBS, "We're not spending enough time with the verbal skills, language skills...skills that don't necessarily mean me clobbering you."

I asked another student, "What do you think Emerson means?"

"Unless you tell me what he means, how should I know?" With so much indignation she could crate and export it, this student informed me that, previous to my class, she had earned a 4.0 GPA.

A student who had promised me that he was the next Tupac Shakur leaned back in his chair. "This is twenty pages long," he announced, as if he'd caught me doing something really, really bad. Others, livid, nodded heavily.

"Yes," I agreed, naively.

"Twenty pages long," he repeated. "Twenty pages."

The other students took on the look of a jury pushed past all reasonable doubt.

I displayed a recent letter in Newsweek that quoted "Self-Reliance" to comment on the 2004 presidential campaign charge of "flip flopping." "'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.' Look," I argued, "'Self-Reliance' charts the DNA of American character!"

"We don't understand," the students asserted. These aggressive avowals of incomprehension flummoxed me. Didn't people usually admit that they did not understand with a certain amount of humility? Humility assumed to deflect shame and ridicule, to marshal aid in understanding? But these students were pronouncing, "I don't understand" not as a request for clarification, but as an indictment. The accused on the witness stand, before a hanging judge, were Emerson and I.

"It's so easy for you," students claimed. "You with your PhD. You were born reading stuff like this. It's different for us."

My parents were peasant immigrants. My mother cleaned houses. My father mined coal and carried bags. I earned my PhD by working as a domestic servant. I am dyslexic. To read, I go through a ritualized series of compensations. After months of unemployment, I am broke. I walked to campus with a change of clothes in my backpack.

I had once raged at the literary canon of "Dead White Males." I wanted to read authors like Anzia Yezierska, an immigrant, a woman, a scrubber of floors, like me, like my mother. And her last name ended, not just in a vowel, but in "ska"!

Time passed. Life hit me, as it hits us all. Spring flowers. Love. The death of

family, and of dreams. Lines I had resisted came back to me, supported me. Lines from Robert Frost, from Thoreau, from Emerson. I learned to be tremendously grateful for the works of the Dead White Males that I had been, kicking and screaming, force-fed.

My students could not see any of this. Someone had told them, had been telling them for some time, that my superior literary education, that my presumed ethnic privilege, that my exposing them to Emerson, to works longer than nineteen pages, to questions that they did not understand, violated them.

I sat down with the woman who hired me. She was scandalized. "Why did you assign 'Self-Reliance'?"

"It's the first work on the syllabus you gave me."

"I didn't even read that syllabus before I gave it to you; it was just something left over from a previous adjunct," she said, snatching it and tearing it up.

She paged through an anthology. She methodically selected the shortest readings, with the easiest vocabularies, and the least challenging ideas. Hemingway – his short, simple sentences notwithstanding – was deemed too hard.

I couldn't sleep or eat. Were I to contribute to certifying college sophomores who could not comprehend "Self-Reliance" as worthy students of literature, I would contribute to a lie. I resigned from the class.

I continued, though, to teach another section of the same class on the same campus. They, too, were accidentally exposed to Emerson. For reasons I cannot explain, these students decided to swim, rather than sink. They read all twenty pages. They went on to read Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ambrose Bierce, and Herman Melville. One wrote so well that I phoned friends to read to them his assignments. "Isn't that terrific?"

These students will receive the same degree as the others.

I despair. And there is Emerson, intoning sonorous lines. "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us." I am grateful that, back in the day, a teacher ordered me to read Emerson, and did not let my fear or my chips-on-shoulder ban Emerson from my life. I wish such teachers on all students.

Sarah Bell

Snail Eater



Snail Eater
by: Sarah
Lackovic

The Virtues of Seeking Discomfort and Wisdom. In That Order.

In today's geek culture, Malcolm Gladwell and Michael Lewis stand alone in their ability to feed well-told, easily digestible intellectual insights to the American thinking class.

And so it might seem odd to find the two of them writing popular, bestselling, oft-quoted and polar opposite accounts of the same topic. Yet, on the question of whether judgments should be made perceptually or analytically, their writing is contradictory and irreconcilable.

Gladwell, in *Blink*, tells the story of a *kouros* presented to the Getty Museum as authentic. After conducting a staggering amount of scientific analysis, the Getty concluded that the statue was indeed genuine—time and effort that was revealed to be worthless by four art experts who determined “in a single glance” that the *kouros* was a fraud:

When Federico Zeri and Evelyn Harrison and Thomas Hoving and Georgios Dontas--and all the others--looked at the kouros and felt an "intuitive repulsion," they were absolutely right. In the first two seconds of looking—in a single glance—they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after 14 months.

Facing him at twenty paces is Lewis, writing in *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. He tells the story of Billy Beane, the General Manager of the Oakland A's who prefers quantitative analysis to intuition. His scouting department, on the other hand, is filled with disciples of the Blink School.

For example, a debate rages on a prospect named Jeremy Brown. Beane sees a statistically productive ballplayer. The scouts see a player does not “look” like a catcher. In their view, he’s fat (“wrong body type”) and throws awkwardly.

Here's how Lewis makes Beane's case.

The statistics allowed you to see past all sorts of sight-based scouting prejudices: the scouting dislike of short right handed pitchers, for instance, or the scouting distrust of skinny little guys who get on base. Or the scouting distaste for fat catchers.

That was the source of the conflict. For Billy [Beane]...a young player is not what he looks like, or what he might become, but what he has done.

Both of these books were best-sellers. *Moneyball* was adapted into an Academy-award winning film and *Blink* has been optioned for a film and attached to names like DeCaprio and Pacino. The ideas expressed by Gladwell and Lewis might be conflicting, but they are unified in one way: they each have taken hold of the American imagination.

That's because our world is vague, messy and confounding. You toss in good old-fashioned randomness and you get an ambiguous and threatening mix that somehow we have to navigate.

This naturally makes us anxious. We seek comfort. Gladwell and Lewis' books are girl-girl porn for our fantasy that that there is a fix-it-and-forget-it solution that will liberate us from the anxiety and uncertainty we are so familiar with. Gladwell and Lewis/Beane's ideas are so sticky because they make us feel comfortable and not because of a track record of making us right.

This is why we don't hear that the most recent Billy Beane storyline has been the more common but less inspiring "Art of Losing an Unfair Game." We also don't hear that Jeremy Brown played only five major league games (the scouts were apparently right about him).

We don't hear that Jeff Wise in *Psychology Today* has noted that *Blink* featured a man who purported to be able to tell when people were lying. Thanks to the resulting publicity, the man's ideas were adopted and implemented by the TSA, with disastrous results. Some \$3 million in taxpayer money later, a scientific peer-review has killed the idea; one leading researcher calls it "hokum."

To complete the circle, the Detroit Institute of Art recently held an exhibition of

fraudulent works that had slipped passed their experts and into the gallery. That's right, a whole exhibition.

The point is this. You will never find any theory of human decision making that will not eventually flounder in the sea of human limitations and we know this very well.

People who ask whether the *Blink* approach or the *Moneyball* approach is the right one aren't asking the right question. The path forward isn't about choosing an approach at all; rather, it is about choosing to sharpen and tune your favored approach (whichever it might be) until it works so well that it treads on the very cliff of human frailty.

This will require us to be a little less promiscuous. Our typical pattern is to stay around for the dating and the honeymoon and bail out when we find out the toilet seat will always be left up. But imagine if we stopped viewing our attempt to subdue a chaotic world as a flavor of the month, and instead viewed it as a lifelong commitment, like we make to a football team or a dentist.

Liberated from our quick fix fantasies, we would begin to see our betrothed approach for what it really was. With nowhere else to turn, we would stop denying the imperfections of our philosophy and begin instead to contemplate them. We would wallow in the flaws. We would bathe in the unease. We would feel it on our skin.

And when we did that, we would find that complex ideas are not magic, but a collection of moving parts that can be adjusted: sockets that can be tightened and levers that can be flipped.

So, if we were the *Blink* scouts who were Billy Beane's enemies, we would stop assuming that 30 years on a metal bleacher makes us right. We would, instead, introduce doubt into our observations.

We might look back at the players in our career and find the "can't miss" prospects who did. Even more difficult, we would look at the players we thought could never make it and did. What were the biases, the blind spots? We'd follow all of our intuitions back to the original observation, and we'd learn to see things differently in the moment. Over time, we would train our intuition.

If we were the scientists who had tested the *kouros*, we would learn that

confirming a hypothesis and being right are sometimes two different things. We would accept that taming a problem in the lab is far different from taming it in the wild universe. We would then apply our new insights—our doubt dividend—into perfecting our craft.

If we were Billy Beane, we might look at our results, and ask ourselves whether our model of finding players no one else wanted (and therefore were available for little money) could survive the emergence of other teams who adapted and began to value them as well. We would realize that in an unfair competition, the solution isn't a one-shot kill, like David's slingshot. It is cycle. You innovate, they adapt, and then you innovate again.

And, those art historians who sniffed out the *kouros* fraud? They should have a meeting and ask what they would do if the next *kouros* forger knew as much about art as they did, and didn't make telltale mistakes—or what they would do if one of them became a forger.

Changing when we fail is easy. Embedded in these challenges is our highest mountain: changing in the face of raging success. This point is made in an excellent new book—*Hannibal and Me*, by Andreas Kluth. The author traces the story of Hannibal—the Billy Beane of his day—as he crosses the Alps to win an unwinnable game: conquering Rome, the New York Yankees of antiquity.

Hannibal, like Beane, had some initial success. He made it over the Alps, and kicked Roman ass from one side of the peninsula to the other.

But he did not conquer Rome. Why? When Hannibal was at the height of his success, he ran across a Roman leader who thought differently. Since Rome lost whenever it fought Hannibal, Fabius decided they would no longer fight. The decision to adjust tactics was as unpopular in Rome as drafting Jeremy Brown was in the A's scouting department, but it turned the tide of the war.

Hannibal, for all his success, had no answer. He was unable to walk away from the tactics that had taken him so far. In the end, the story of Hannibal is a tragedy for his people and for him. Starved of victory, Hannibal ended up losing everything—include his homeland—to the Romans.

Success and failure are both moving targets. People adapt, nature evolves, randomness intervenes—everything is on a continuum from newly minted to broken. This is a hard truth and normally leaves us scurrying for Lewis, Gladwell or another guru de jour. The idea of restless life of seeking is often more than we think we can handle.

Walking this path is not the exclusive domain of emperors, baseball general managers or art historians. Here on the streets of the world, there are bakeries and Churches and daycare centers where being right matters.

And being right can only be the product of a daily struggle with uncomfortable things. It will never be the result of anyone who is on auto-pilot. The minute we begin to think that we have broken the code, we have placed ourselves on a tragic and certain course; every minute in which we understand that nothing is permanent, that we must constantly adjust, even in the face of raging success, those minutes are where we embrace our true human struggle, and create the conditions for lasting success.

Cathy Adams

Lena Ray

"Lena Ray. Lena Ray." The voice sounded flat and weary over the crackling intercom. Lena Ray let the words echo in her head. She wished she had given some other name, something that flowed like Chantirella Muldoon, or Sharna LaBeau. She let her tongue wrap around the names in her mouth which tasted like wine from a bottle instead of a carton.

"Lena Ray! Last call for Lena Ray." The nurse had to lean forward to speak into the green metal microphone on her desk. Her voice was sharp this time. When the nurse caught her eye, Lena snapped to, gathered her things, and slumped over to the desk with one child in her arms and another in tow.

"Are you allergic to any medications?" said the nurse.

"No."

"Are you currently taking any medications?"

"No."

"Do you have any history of mental illness in your family?"

"Yes, my daddy," said Lena.

"Do you-"

"And my brother, Tooley."

"Any others?" The nurse stared at Lena over the tops of her glasses. She had the look Lena had seen in the faces of so many government workers stuck in jobs helping those whom they had begun to perceive as hopeless.

"Uncle Fox, Grandma Whitley, and Uncle Vernon. And my youngest, Doody here." She motioned with her head at the toddler she held in her arms. "He's started to beat his head on the wall a lot. That's how it started with Uncle Fox, so I reckon Doody must have it, too." The nurse receptionist looked at Lena with one eyebrow arched high. "I answered all these questions when I was here on Tuesday," said Lena.

The nurse flipped through some papers in a file but said nothing.

Lena was slight and slump-shouldered, her beige coat not quite wide enough to button together. In her hair hung a tiny bright blue bit of lucky Charms, probably from the sticky handed Doody. The nurse's condescending eyes made Lena warm under her coat. Underneath she wore a yellow blouse with a Dr. Pepper stain on the left breast. She hadn't noticed it until she was already dressed that morning. She had told herself she'd just keep her coat on all day. Walking the three miles to the clinic with a baby on one hip and holding the hand of another child Chihuahua-leaping all the way, she saw herself becoming just like the old people at the Friendly Hands Village where she worked, each wearing mustard, tea, and barbecue stains like badges. And now she sat in the free clinic clutching two children and trying to cover up the fate to which she was doomed, spelled out in Dr. Pepper down her blouse.

In the examination room Lena sat in a chair in the corner and ordered her children to be quiet when the doctor came in. The tests last Tuesday had been painful. She'd turned her head in dread and nausea when the blood filled the vial. Today they were supposed to tell her something, anything, whatever they could. Lena's cheeks were hot and she felt stifled in her coat. She took it off and tried to think of a way to place her hand over her chest to cover the soda stain, but she felt like a model posing in a shop window, so she put it down.

Chuck, her four year old, reached for a glass jar of tongue depressors and she snapped her fingers at him to stop. "When can we go home?" he asked.

The door opened and Dr. Wheeler stepped inside. "Lena," she said, looking down at the medical chart in her hand. "Lena Ray . . . ? There doesn't seem to be a last name."

"That's it. Lena Ray. That's all there is."

"Oh, I see." The doctor slid a low stool close to Lena and sat down. "Ms. Ray. Is it 'Ms'?"

"Since last summer," said Lena.

Chuck flicked at the curled out edge of a heart disease poster, but Dr. Wheeler ignored him and concentrated on her feet. It was bad. Lena knew it was bad when doctors looked at their feet trying to figure out what to say.

"What we found is that you have cancer, and it has spread from your breast to your lymph nodes. We had hoped it hadn't gotten into the lymph nodes, but we can be very aggressive in our treatment." Dr. Wheeler's lips kept moving and Lena knew she was talking, but the sounds were sucked away deep into her ears. Her head started to wobble, and she had to lean against the wall behind her to make it stop. Doody put something into his mouth from the floor, and Chuck ran his hand along the counter tops. Lena reached down and picked Doody up into her arms. He smelled of powder, cereal, and Vick's Vapo Rub. She held his head up next to her chest and put her hand over his heart, feeling every beat.

On the walk to her sister's house Lena hardly felt Doody's weight in her arms. Chuck dragged so far behind that when she crossed a street she turned around to find him still on the other side, and she had to go back and get him. She hoisted the strap of her bag higher on her shoulder, and they set off across the street again.

Tammy's yard was covered in ankle high dead and dying grass. Lena let the screen door slap shut behind her as a gush of humid warmth perfumed with cigarette smoke rolled over her. Doody and Chuck took off for the bedroom at the rear of the house.

Tammy tilted her head backwards and looked at her sister upside down from her place on the sofa. "So, what'd the doctor say?" She turned down the sound on QVC and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray on the coffee table.

"They said. . ." Lena's voice trailed off. "The doctor needs to do some more tests."

"Don't they have any ideas?"

"I have to go back next week. I'll know something then," said Lena. She heard shouts coming from her nephew's room. Chuck's voice rose up in shrieking anger and then there was a thump. "I'll go," Lena said, motioning for Tammy to stay.

The house was too hot and the hallway seemed to jerk in front of her as she made her way back to Kevin's room. She pinched her eyes shut and realized she was still wearing her coat. She unbuttoned it, letting it hang open over her stained blouse.

In the bedroom Chuck and Kevin's fingers were locked in a tug-of-war at opposite ends of a giant lavender rabbit.

"It's mine! Aunt Lena, make him let go," Kevin pleaded.

Lena leaned on the doorway looking at Kevin's cowboy wallpaper and the double bed with Nascar stickers on the headboard. His Dale Earnhardt bedspread was wadded up on the floor and Doody sat in the middle of it hitting himself in the forehead with a rubber penguin.

"You sure do have a nice room Kevin," Lena said, not moving from her spot in the doorway. "You got a big bed. I bet all of ya'll could sleep in that bed."

"I don't want to take a nap. I hate naps," Chuck said, still holding the rabbit's feet. Lena gave him a weak smile and he scowled back at her. "I hate it here. I want to go home. I hate Kevin," he said.

"No, you don't," said Lena.

"I wish I never had to come here," Chuck whined. Lena was glad to hear that Tammy had turned the television up once more.

"I don't want to hear you say that anymore. Life's full of hard choices and sometimes. . ." She let the thought go, shaking her head at the uselessness of explaining anything. "I'm gone to work. You boys be sweet and try not to get on Aunt Tammy's nerves." She was out the door leaving all three boys at their smacking and pulling.

Lena pulled the vacuum cleaner along behind her into Mrs. Wadley's room. Slumped in her wheelchair, Mrs. Wadley sipped on a glass of ginger ale and watched *The Price is Right*. She absentmindedly reached into her pocket for her cigarettes.

"I forgot that I can't smoke. Then I forgot that I forgot I can't smoke. If I wasn't senile when I came into this place I will be when I leave it," said Mrs. Wadley.

"You planning on leaving?" asked Lena, pushing the dust cup onto the end of the vacuum hose.

"In a box. Some day."

There was nothing to argue. That was exactly the way she would leave. Some

day. Lena flipped the vacuum switch and began cleaning the rug all around Mrs. Wadley. The contestants' squeals were drowned out by the roar of the machine as they tried to guess the prices of snow mobiles, double baby strollers, and car wax. Lena finished her vacuuming and bent over to wrap the cord around the handle. Her back ached from the effort. She didn't remember feeling so much discomfort the week before.

"Something the matter with you?" said Mrs. Wadley, reaching for the invisible cigarettes once again.

The staff wasn't supposed to say negative things about their health. Everyone was supposed to be energetic and cheerful. Lena pushed up from her knees, grunting as she stood up full.

"I'm just fine." Lena motioned to the small embroidered cloth spread over the arm of an easy chair next to Mrs. Wadley. "I see Mrs. Greenbaum's stitching a new placemat." Mrs. Wadley eyed the picture of two leprechauns sitting on a toadstool smoking cigarettes. The smoke had been drawn on with an ink pen. It swirled upward in a navy blue line over their tiny green hats.

"Damned ugliest thing she's done yet," said Mrs. Wadley.

"It keeps her busy," said Lena.

"Half the time she walks in here, takes a look at them, and asks me if I made them."

"You're lucky," said Lena.

"Am I?"

"You still have your mind."

"You sure?" said Mrs. Wadley.

"Luckier than some of us," Lena muttered. She began pulling the sheets off the bed and rolling them into a ball.

"You think it's a party living here with you people taking care of everything?"

"I wish someone would come to my house and clean up after my kids."

"I'd trade places with you any day," said Mrs. Wadley.

"I doubt it," Lena muttered. She shook her head and let the pillow fall out of its

case onto the floor. Her arms sagged at her sides and the case hung listlessly in her hands.

Mrs. Wadley squinted, trying to get a better look. "I can tell something's bothering you."

"Yeah." Lena's voice was soft, almost too soft for Mrs. Wadley to hear. "They told me I have cancer."

Mrs. Wadley wheeled her chair closer. "Where is it?"

"Here." Lena put her right hand over her breast as if she were saluting the flag. "Found out this morning. They want me to start chemo. They're giving me a sixty percent chance if I have the treatments."

"Had it ten years ago. See this?" Mrs. Wadley crossed both liver spotted hands over her chest. "Full mastectomy."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh pooh. You take what comes to you. You get tough. You deal with it, and you go on. If you can't go on, you die, and then it's not a problem any more."

Lena slid the pillow into a fresh, white cotton case and tossed it onto the bed. "I've got four kids."

"That's a tough one. You got a husband?"

"He left last August."

"Send any money?"

"Not a dime," said Lena.

"Bastard."

"That's what I said."

"You got family?"

"My mom, but she doesn't get around too good. She can't take on four kids. And there's my sister, Tammy. I couldn't even tell her this morning," said Lena, sitting down on the half made bed. The tears came upon her so fast so fast she didn't have time to wipe them away before they fell. Mrs. Wadley held her hands out palm up and cocked her head to one side. It made Lena think of the photo of a beseeching Jesus in a Bible story book she'd had as a child.

"Look at you, sitting there all slumped over like you've lost your backbone. You've got something to live for. Four somethings. Me, I beat it so I could retire to this shitty place, eat food in a chow line, listen to out of tune gospel piano players every Wednesday morning, and put up with a tombmate who can't remember which bed is hers."

Lena laughed a little at the word 'tombmate.' She'd heard the staff use it in the secrecy of the linen closet, but she'd never heard it from a resident.

"Laughing will do you good," said Mrs. Wadley. She pulled herself up in her chair as tall as she could sit and pointed a finger at Lena. "Here's what you do – choose the sixty percent. Forget the rest. It doesn't exist for you. The sixty percent is all."

The sidewalk on the other side was empty, and most of the afternoon traffic had petered out. The block was lined by a shabby row of apartments book-ended by a pawn shop and a shoe repair store. This was the worse part of the walk, and it looked saddest of all in the dying winter light. But today she hardly noticed. Through her thin rubber-soled shoes she felt the pebbles on the sidewalk. Chuck picked a handful of weeds from a crack in the edge of the sidewalk next to the pawn shop and threw them over his head. Doody gave a slobbery grin over Lena's shoulder, and Chuck did it again for his appreciative audience.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

She shouldn't be hearing that word at thirty-three years old. It stuck in her ears like an icicle being shoved into her head. Her stomach was knotted, and she was sure she could feel the cancer cells moving, feasting, and growing in her chest. Chuck pulled at the back of her coat and shouted something. She turned and looked down at his chattering mouth, and it took her a moment to decipher the sounds.

"He wants a dollar," said Chuck.

"What?" she said.

"Spare a dollar?" The man standing before her had been there several seconds, but she didn't see him until his last sentence.

"I'm sorry. A dollar. Sure." Lena shifted Doody onto her other hip, and began rummaging through her handbag for a one dollar bill. She pulled out a dirty, folded bill that had been stuck to a piece of melted Juicy Fruit.

"And the rest of it." The man pulled a knife from his pocket and flicked it in her face.

"What?"

"Everything you've got."

"Everything I've got," said Lena.

He glanced around him and jabbed the knife closer to her face. The knife seemed large in his hands and she noticed his fingernails were bitten to the quick.

"Come on," he muttered.

She kept staring at the raw, dirty cuticles, her face unchanged. Her mouth hung open and she told herself to move, but her body would not obey.

"Now!" He hissed, flicking the knife once more.

Lena reached into her purse again and sorted through tissue, chewing gum, receipts, a comb, lipstick, coupons, and a sandwich bag stuffed with baby wipes. She found a five dollar bill and some change in her coin purse. She held it out to him.

"All of it."

"That's it," she said.

He snatched the money and tried to take her purse from her shoulder. She jerked away reflexively, holding onto the purse and the baby. "Just a minute. Let me get my stuff."

"I'll cut you, I mean it." He shook a wisp of dirty blonde hair from his eyes and held the knife close to his chest, nearly hiding it behind the flap of his jacket.

She pulled her driver's license from a plastic card holder and handed the purse over to him. "At least let me keep my license. Do you know what a pain it is to wait in the DMV line?"

"You got credit cards?"

"You got my purse, now leave us alone."

The man began pilfering through the purse with his free hand, throwing out the

flotsam of Lena's life in the weeds next to the pawn shop. If she'd not been holding a baby on her hip and dragging a four year old by the hand, she would have run away. Chuck wrapped himself around her leg and watched the man.

"Aren't you supposed to run away?" asked Lena.

The man looked up from the purse, disbelief on his face. "What?"

"S'what they do on the TV," Lena said.

He slammed the imitation leather against the building and kicked at her things. "I'll be damned! This all you got?"

"Of course that's all I got."

"Shit," he muttered, waving the knife around as if he'd forgotten it was in his hand. "You ain't worth nothing. Man, what a goddamn joke," he said, and he kicked at a tube of lipstick sending it skittering across the cement.

Inside Lena felt a tiny splitting sensation, like the bursting of a blister. It was hurt and relief boiling together. She let Doody slide to the ground next to her feet. "What did you say?"

The man looked at her, taken aback by the question.

"No, I want answer. What makes you think I'm not worth anything?" She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"You got less than seven bucks on you and no credit cards. Lady, I've got more money than you."

"So, you think I'm worth nothing?" she said, taking a step toward him.

"Dumb bitch, I've got a knife," he said, waving it again. Lena's head cocked to one side and she didn't move. The rage that filled her was dangerously close to topping off inside her head. A man in a worn army jacket approached, and Lena's mugger flipped the knife shut, quickly sticking it back in his jacket as he walked away behind the man. Lena's smoldering eyes never left the mugger. The back of his head snapped in a cocky rhythm as he walked, and Lena knew she should just go, keep going, but her anger was choking her.

"Hey, I'm not finished with you!" she shouted.

He looked over his shoulder once, twice, and stopped. "What?"

Lena stuffed her belongings back in the bag as she spoke. "You're telling me I don't have anything worth stealing. That I'm not worth anything, huh?" She snatched Doody from the pavement and trotted briskly toward the man, her mud smeared bag clenched in her fist.

"Let me show you something." She plopped Doody down again and reached inside the neckline of her blouse. She jerked a necklace out, holding a pendant between her fingers. "Take a look at this. It's a real emerald and those two stones on either side are real diamonds. I won it in the Green Giant Little Sprout Sweepstakes. I had to buy twenty-one cans of creamed corn to get the winning label, but I did it. You want something valuable off of me, then take it. You're not walking away from me saying I've got nothing worth stealing, you useless, two-bit, shit-faced, little pipsqueak." Lena unfastened the necklace and shoved it at the man. He looked down at the tiny chain holding a rice sized emerald set between diamond chips so small he had to squint to see them.

"I said take it!" The necklace dangled between Lena's clenched white knuckles.

"I don't want that," the mugger said.

"You went to all that trouble to pull a knife on me and my kids and now you tell me you don't want my stuff!" Lena's breath puffed out fast and white in the chilled air.

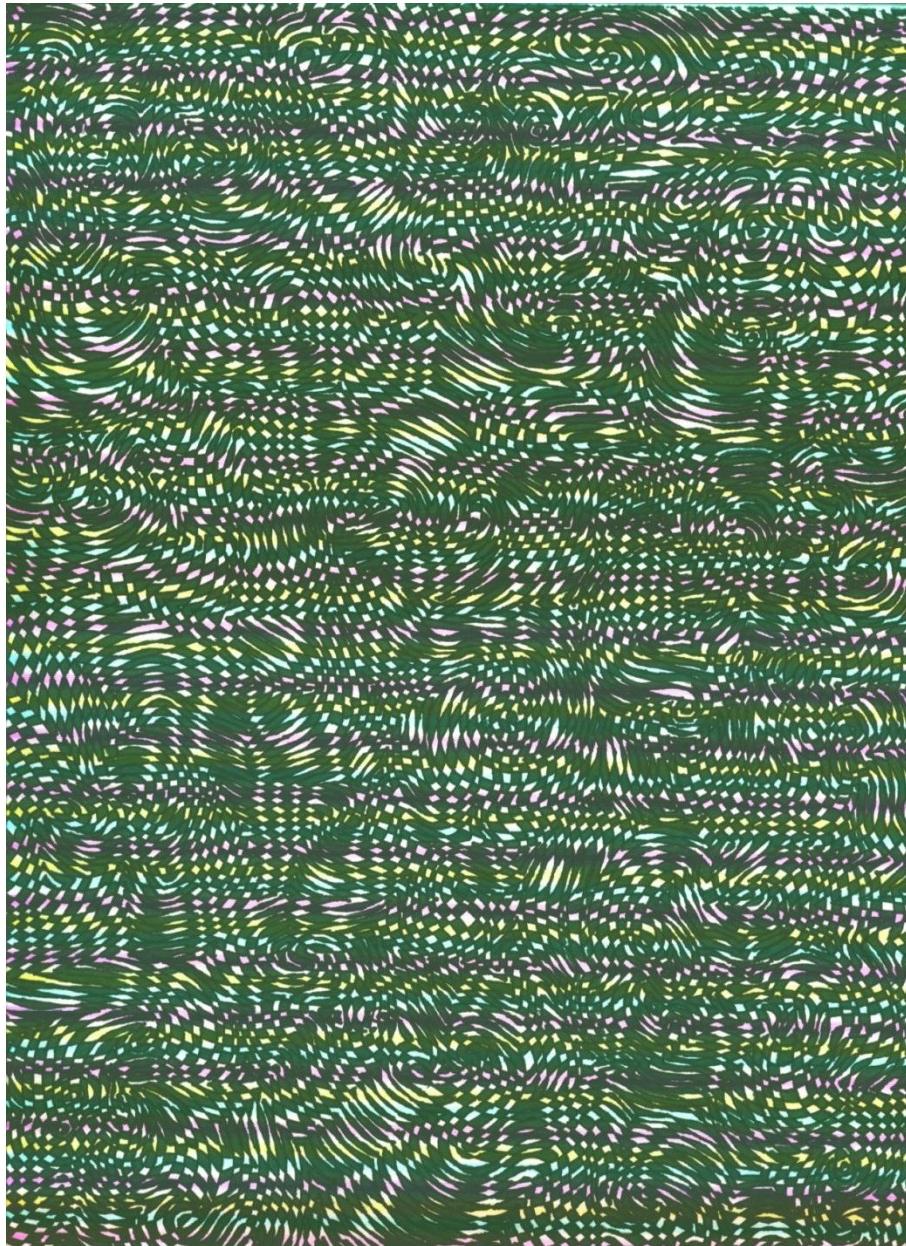
"You've got nothing I want. Keep your damn necklace," he said, turning to go again.

Lena caught him by the shoulder and turned him around. "I've got more than this! I've got cancer, too. How about that, you thieving son of a bitch! How much is that worth? I've got a whole sixty percent of a chance to live. You can have the other forty percent 'cause the sixty's mine. You understand me? I'll throw it in for free."

He threw her hand away from his shoulder and took off running. Lena's fingers gripped the necklace fiercely, but she could not feel her fingernails making red welt moons in the palm of her hand.

Sarah Bell

Green Distortion



Contributor Notes

CATHY ADAMS' first novel, *This Is What It Smells Like*, was recently published by New Libri Press, Washington. Her short stories and essays have been published in *Utne*, *The Philosophical Mother*, *Relief Journal*, *Ghoti Magazine*, *Heliotrope*, and *WNCWoman*, among others. Her writing awards include the Mona Schreiber Award for Fiction, a National League of Pen Women's Prize, and a National Public Radio News Director's award. Her work has been aired on Georgia Peachstate and Isothermal Public Radio networks. A native of Alabama and former resident of Georgia and North Carolina, she now lives and writes in Xinzhen, China.

SARAH BELL (née Lackovic) studied Fine Arts at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. She bounced between a few different majors before finding and falling in love with metalsmithing. She graduated from EUP with BFA majoring in metalsmithing with minor in painting and art history in 2007. Most of her work is influenced and inspired by the world of fantasy. Sarah resides in Erie, Pennsylvania and has had pieces in eight different juried shows as well as one piece permanently in the corporate collection for Intellectual Property Services Inc. She is also rather crafty with a sewing machine or crochet hook.

JEFF FEARNSIDE lived and worked in Central Asia for four years, and traveled widely along the Silk Road. He came to the region as a university instructor through the U.S. Peace Corps in Kazakhstan and stayed as manager of the Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. He traveled throughout both countries on numerous occasions and visited Turkey, Northern India, Uzbekistan, and the Xinjiang Province of China as well.

Other nonfiction of his relating to Central Asia has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Madrid*, *Potomac Review*, *Etude*, *Rock & Sling*, *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and the anthologies *A Life Inspired: Tales of Peace Core Service* and *The Chalk Circle: Intercultural Prizewinning Essays*. He lives with his Kazakhstani wife and two cats in Corvallis, Oregon. His essay in *New Madrid* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

BJ FISCHER is a writer who has published on subjects including the use of baseball by conservatives and the significance of the moon landing to someone who watched it as a five year old, as well as the *Four People You Meet On Earth* and *Enlighten-Mat: Expanding the Laundry Tribe*. Most recently, he wrote *Love Your Life, Accept Your Team* for Midmajority.com. His work has appeared in *The (Toledo) Blade*, the *Bygone Bureau*, *Punchnel's, Thought Catalog*, *Impose Magazine* and the *Minneapolis Review of Baseball*.

He is also an award-winning creator of television and public relations commercials and campaigns. He lives in Saline, Michigan, outside Ann Arbor.

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WILLIAM REICHARD is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Sin Eater* (Mid-List Press, 2010). He edited the anthology, *American Tensions: Literature of Identity and the Search for Social Justice*, which was published by New Village Press in 2011.

HELEN RUGGIERI lives in Olean, NY and has a book of poems, *Butterflies Under a Japanese Moon*, from Kitsune Press and a book forthcoming from Kelsay Books—*The Kingdom Where Everybody Sings Off Key*. Essays have appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Ars Medica*, *Contemporary Haibun*, and elsewhere.

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